

## Episode 3 — Three Masks of the Widow



The letter arrived in Mara Ciss's hands on a Tuesday. Her own handwriting. Her own signature. It was impossible.

She sat in the boarding house's parlor, which smelled of old tobacco and the kind of dust that settles into wool curtains after decades, and read the letter again. It was about her daughter in Kettleholm — a detail only she would know, only she would write about. The phrasing, too. Even the way the 'M' was crossed at the top. Her hands shook.

The proprietor, a thin woman named Hells, watched from behind the counter with the neutral expression of someone who had learned long ago not to ask questions about her guests. The boarding house sat at the center of Grey Dock, a town that existed at the edge of something — a frontier, a checkpoint on a trade route that was slowly dying. The streets were dusty. The brick buildings had faded painted signs. The sky was perpetually grey.

“That's not possible,” Mara whispered.

But it was. Because she had walked past herself on Market Street two hours ago.

The woman had been wearing the blue coat that Mara had ordered from the tailor six months prior.

The woman had Mara's face — not a resemblance, but her face. The same small scar on the left cheekbone from when she'd fallen from a horse at fourteen. The woman had looked at her with eyes full of confused recognition, and then had hurried past into the crowd.

Mara had stood frozen in the street for five minutes. Then she had come here, to the boarding house, where she had been living for the past nine days.

Because she had died nine days ago.

That's what people said, anyway. The real Mara Ciss — the one who had lived in Grey Dock for thirty-two years, the widow of Thomas Ciss, the woman who knew everyone and minded no one's business — had walked out of her house on a Wednesday and simply ceased to exist. They found her in the ravine at the eastern edge of town. It took them three days to identify the body. Decay worked fast in warm weather.

Except now she was walking around in a blue coat.

—

The second Mara was waiting at the community well when the first Mara left the boarding house.

"We need to talk," the second Mara said. Her voice sounded like Mara's voice. Like wind through a room. "Before she tells people you're mad."

"Who are you?" Mara asked. Her mouth was dry.

"I'm Mara Ciss. And so are you, apparently." The second Mara's smile was uncertain. "The constable won't believe us. No one will. So we need to figure out what's happened before—"

"Before what?"

The second Mara's face flickered. Just for a moment. The edges of it seemed to lose definition, as if a candle had guttered, and then she was solid again. Her hand went to her temple. "I don't... before she does whatever she's planning."

"How many of us are there?" Mara asked.

"That's what I was going to ask you."

—

The third Mara was waiting in the boarding house library, sitting in the corner chair, knitting. She looked exactly like Mara. She knit exactly like Mara. She had the same habit of breathing slightly through her nose, the same slight tension in her shoulders. When she looked up, her eyes were warm and sad and familiar.

"I've been expecting one of you," she said. "Sit down."

Mara didn't sit. "Which one are you?"

"I'm the one who knows about the ravine," the third Mara said. She set down her knitting with careful precision. "I'm the one who walked out of this house nine days ago, exactly as I planned. I'm the one who did everything right."

"That's not possible. You're dead."

"Yes. The body in the ravine is dead. It was always meant to be. I needed it there so everyone would stop looking for her." The third Mara's expression was patient. Disappointed, maybe. "Do you understand? I needed her gone. I needed all the chaos and the mourning and the questions, so when I returned, no one would know what to do. Everyone would be confused enough that they wouldn't look too closely."

"What are you?" Mara heard herself ask.

The third Mara's smile widened. For just a fraction of a second, it looked wrong — like two expressions overlaid, like a double exposure. "I'm Mara Ciss. I've been Mara Ciss for nine days now. And I'm going to be her forever."

She stood. As she moved, her shadow on the wall didn't quite match her body. It arrived a moment too late.

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Ace arrived at Grey Dock on an evening when the sky looked like tarnished silver. She was alone, as always. Her katanas caught the light as she moved through the streets. The townspeople saw her and looked away. They had learned, in a hundred towns before this one, not to ask questions when someone like her appeared.

She went to the constable's office first. It was a small building adjacent to a larger building that was probably the administrative house. The constable was a broad man with a network of broken capillaries across his nose. He was smoking a pipe and looking at a stack of papers with the expression of someone who had very recently lost his sanity.

"I'm looking for missing persons," Ace said. She didn't ask. Statements, not questions.

The constable's eyes moved to her katanas. Then back to her face. "There aren't any missing persons. There's one deceased. Mara Ciss. Widow. Found in the ravine nine days ago."

"And now there are three of her," Ace said.

The constable's pipe slipped from his mouth.

"Where," Ace said.

—

The boarding house was called the Grey Dock Inn, which was logical if uninspired. The proprietor, Hells, brought Ace to the library without comment. The three Maras were present. They stood in a triangle formation, each uncertain, each watching the other two.

Ace studied them. She observed for a long time without speaking. The first Mara — the one from the letter — was standing nearest to the window. Her hands were trembling slightly. She had the look of someone who had been cut loose from reality and was still falling.

The second Mara stood near the bookshelf. She looked confused and frightened, but there was a lucidity to her fear. She was still trying to solve the problem. Still trying to make sense of it.

The third Mara stood by the knitting chair. She was the only one who looked calm. The only one who

looked like she belonged.

“Which one of you remembers,” Ace said slowly, “the year your husband died?”

All three of them answered simultaneously:

“1994.”

But the third Mara's voice had a strange quality — two tones at once, so brief it might have been an acoustic trick, might have been the wind. The voice of a woman over the voice of something else entirely.

The first Mara gasped. “Did you hear that?”

“I don't know what you mean,” the third Mara said. Her face remained serene.

Ace closed her eyes. She accessed something deep and instinctual, something that had kept her alive through a hundred hunts. Then she opened her eyes and looked directly at the third Mara.

“Tell me about your daughter,” Ace said.

The real Mara flinched. “That's private. That's—”

“Not you,” Ace said, without looking away from the third Mara. “Tell me about the daughter.”

The third Mara's smile didn't falter. “I don't have a daughter.”

“You do,” the first Mara said. Her voice was shaking. “She's in Kettleholm. You write to her. She won't write back, but you write to her every month. On the sixteenth. About the weather and what you've eaten and—” The first Mara's face crumpled. “And how much you miss having her here.”

The third Mara turned slowly toward the first. As she turned, her shadow on the wall twisted — it arrived out of sync with her movement, sliding across the plaster a moment too late. A visible slip.

“You're not real,” the third Mara said. “Both of you. You're mistakes. I finished the absorption. I became her. I am her.” The calm voice fractured. For a moment, something else spoke through it — something that had been underneath all along, a sound like wind through a deep cave, like roots pulling through soil. “I am her and I will be her and everyone will forget there ever was anyone else.”

The third Mara moved.

She moved faster than a human body should move. Her hand shot out toward the first Mara, and when Ace saw the skin of that hand, she understood. The hand was wrong. The texture was off. It looked like human skin but it was too smooth, too perfect, as if it were a mask that hadn't quite settled. When it touched the first Mara's arm, the first Mara screamed.

Ace's katana was already moving.

The blade sang as it came free. The light of it — that soft emerald glow — filled the library. Ace moved like water, like violence made efficient. She didn't move to block the creature's hand. She moved to separate it from the arm it was attached to.

The creature shrieked and dropped the first Mara's arm. It whirled toward Ace, and now its face was truly showing — the edges were dissolving, not from decomposition but from displacement, as if its

features were a photograph being dragged across broken glass. Two voices were speaking at once, layered, one underneath the other. Its shadow had completely detached from its body. It was moving on the wall independently, thrashing.

The creature attacked.

It was strong in a way that didn't correspond to its frame. It had strength like a living cable, like tension made flesh. Its fingers were too long, too jointed. It moved with the alien fluidity of something that was still learning how to wear a body. Ace was faster. She was always faster.

The first katana cut across its shoulder. The second creature that wore the shape of Mara Ciss didn't bleed. It leaked. A substance that was almost clear, almost phosphorescent, dripped from the wound. Where it fell, the wood floor hissed and smoked.

"You can't kill what I am," the creature said, and its voice was a chorus now, dozens of whispers underneath a single human sentence. "I am everyone. I am identity itself. I am the space where a person used to be, and I fill it perfectly."

Ace didn't answer. She had already analyzed the pattern of attack, the angle of approach, the way the creature was shifting its center of gravity. She moved inside its reach, her smaller frame an advantage in the confined space. Her second blade came up from low, angled for the sternum.

The creature knocked her aside with a backhanded blow that felt like being hit by a falling beam. Ace went with the momentum and used it to put distance between them. She flowed to her feet, and for a moment the two of them simply regarded each other across the destroyed space of the library.

The creature was becoming more visible now. The mask was slipping entirely. Underneath, there was something like a face, but it was too simple, too geometric. Like a face designed by someone who had never seen a face before. Like the blueprint of human features, but rendered in something that was neither flesh nor bone. Its skin — if it could be called skin — was peeling away in places, and underneath was something luminescent and wet.

"I will still be her," it said. "I will still wear her. You can destroy this flesh, but I am already in the town. I am already spreading. I walked through the market. I shook hands at the temple. I sat at the counter of the smithy and spoke about the weather. Every person I touched, I began the process. Every handshake, every embrace, every moment of human contact — I was making more of myself. You can kill this body, but I am infinite now. I am epidemic."

Ace felt something cold move through her chest. Not fear. She didn't have fear. But a kind of clarity. A recognition of the scope of what needed to be done.

She moved.

This time, the creature was ready. But readiness didn't matter. Ace had already decided where it would move, had already calculated the arc of its defense. She came in low, let it overcommit to the strike at her head, and used its own momentum to drive her blade upward through its ribs.

The creature convulsed. It made a sound that wasn't a scream. It was the sound of something being unmade, being peeled apart at the molecular level. The luminescence underneath began to spread, to leak out of the wound. It was burning through the creature from the inside, consuming it.

"No," it said, and now its voice was just one voice, small and desperate. "No, I was supposed to be her. I was supposed to be everyone. I was supposed to—"

Ace twisted the blade. The creature fell. It hit the floor and began to dissolve, not like melting but like being unpicked, like a sweater coming apart at the seams. The luminescent substance spread across the floorboards, and where it touched, the wood became soft, then turned to dust.

She pulled her blade free and stepped back.

Within thirty seconds, nothing was left. The space where the creature had been was empty except for a scorch mark on the floor and the smell of something burnt and wrong.

Ace turned to the two surviving Maras. The first one was cradling her arm. Where the creature had touched her, her skin was beginning to discolor slightly, to develop a too-smooth quality. Early absorption.

“Get to the temple,” Ace said to her. “Tell the priest. Tell him everyone the creature touched needs to be isolated and watched. If they begin to change — if their features become too perfect, if their shadows move wrong, if their voices double — they become the next one. The next outbreak.”

“Can it be stopped?” the second Mara asked. Her voice was small.

Ace didn't answer. She was already moving toward the door.

“Wait,” the first Mara called out. “Thank you. I—”

But Ace was already gone.

—

She left Grey Dock before dawn. The streets were empty. The sky was still that tarnished silver color, as if the light itself had become corrupted. She didn't look back.

Behind her, in the boarding house, the two remaining Maras sat in the library, not speaking. The first Mara watched the discoloration on her skin slowly spread. In a few days, she would know for certain whether she was becoming something else. Whether Ace's warning had come too late.

The second Mara simply sat, and tried to remember who she was.

In the temple, the priest was beginning a quarantine. He didn't know if it would work. He didn't know how many people the creature had touched. He was acting on the word of a woman no one had seen arrive and no one had seen leave.

But he acted.

—

Ace was many kilometers from Grey Dock when the sun finally broke through the grey clouds. It didn't make the day brighter. It just made it warmer. She kept moving, not toward anywhere in particular, but away from this place. Away from this problem.

She would reach another town eventually. There would be another problem. Another thing that wore human shape and had to be unmade.

This was her work. This was all her work.

She didn't think about the first Mara's arm, still slowly changing. She didn't think about the second

Mara sitting alone in the library. She didn't think about anything at all.

She walked. The ground passed beneath her feet. The world continued, vast and indifferent and full of things that needed to be killed.

Ace moved through it like a shadow.

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Last update: **20/03/2026 10:46**

