

Episode 40 — The Second Contract

Ashford was the kind of town that prosperity had rewritten. The main street was clean, the storefronts maintained, the sidewalks unbroke. The school building at the north end looked new—or rather, looked perpetually renewed, the way things that are cared for stay young. There was a clinic with fresh paint. The library had expanded within the last decade. A farmer's market operated twice a week in the square. Ashford had achieved the kind of success that small towns could achieve if they had the right luck, or the right connections, or the right deal.

Ace parked on the eastern edge and walked in. The residue that had drawn her here was faint but directional: the signature of a blood contract, the specific flavor of an entity that fed on obligation and human willingness. She had encountered contracts before. They left a mark in the world, a kind of debt-weight that accumulated in the air itself.

This mark was old. Not old in years—blood contracts aged differently. Old in intensity. Layered. Settled into the bedrock of the town's functioning like a foundation stone.

She walked to the town hall. It was a small building, two stories, with a steeple that was probably for aesthetics. Inside, the walls were lined with records and certificates. A woman in her seventies sat at a desk, and a man of similar age sat in a chair by a window. They looked up when Ace entered, and something in their expressions changed immediately.

"Help you?" the woman asked. She was careful about the tone, but she was afraid.

"Margaret Ashford," the man said. "We're expecting you."

Ace said nothing. She walked to the nearest chair and sat. The silence extended. Ace was patient with silence in ways that most people could not sustain.

"You know about the contract," Margaret finally said. Not a question.

"We've known for twenty years," the man said. His name was Thomas. He was the one who spoke when Margaret couldn't. "My parents told me. Their parents told them. Going back. It's been in the family."

"Sixty-three years," Margaret said. "Since the last collection. Sixty-three years since we've been prosperous. Before that, we were dying. Slowly, but dying. The clinic didn't exist. The school was three rooms. We had nothing."

"One person," Thomas said. "Every decade. No suffering. We ensure that. It's painless."

"They go," Margaret said. "That's all. They go where the Entity takes them. We don't know where. We don't ask. It's part of the contract."

"Is it a good death?" Ace asked. It was the first thing she had said since arriving. Both of them registered it like a stone in still water.

"We believe it is," Margaret said carefully. "The Entity is bound by the terms. No torture. No suffering. Just... departure."

"You believe," Ace said.

"Yes," Thomas said. He was not trying to argue. He was saying what was true. "We believe that. And

we have to.”

“Why?”

It was Margaret who answered. “Because if we don't believe it, we can't live with ourselves. And this town needs us to. We're the only ones who know. The only ones who've decided it's acceptable.”

Thomas got to his feet and walked to a locked cabinet. He withdrew a key from his pocket, opened the cabinet, and removed a fireproof case. Inside the case was a single page of paper, written in a precise hand, using language that belonged to old contracts: the kind that bound both parties equally, that required not just obligation but consent.

The covenant was clear. The Entity would provide protection for the town's ventures: prosperity in agriculture, luck in trade, health among the residents, longevity of life. In exchange, one person per decade would be taken in full. No force. The contract specified voluntary compliance, which Ashford's elders had always managed to arrange through inheritance and careful social pressure that never quite became explicit coercion.

“The current one is due,” Margaret said.

“A young man,” Thomas said. “Daniel Kessler. He's twenty-four. He was born the year of the last collection. His parents are both dead. He has no siblings. He's lived here his whole life. Everyone here loves him.”

“Has he been told?” Ace asked.

“Not yet,” Margaret said. “We were still—we were still trying to get him to understand. To accept it. He's been resistant.”

“Resistant,” Ace repeated.

“He doesn't want to die,” Thomas said, and there was something in his voice that might have been apology or might have been defensiveness. “Even though the death is painless. Even though it would mean Ashford stays alive.”

“The Entity is in town,” Margaret said. “It came three days ago. It's staying at my house. It's very patient.”

Ace stood. She did not ask permission. She simply stood and walked toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Thomas called after her.

“To see the Entity,” Ace said, and then she was out.

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The Entity in Margaret's house was not like most contract entities Ace had encountered. It was humanoid in the way that competent forgeries are humanoid—everything in the right place, everything proportioned correctly, but the sum of it was not quite human. It wore outdated formal wear: a suit from the 1960s, meticulously maintained, perfectly fitted. It sat at Margaret's dining room table eating soup with a spoon, each movement precise and separate from the others, like someone performing the action of eating rather than actually hungry.

It looked up when Ace entered.

"Ah," the Entity said. "The Ace. We knew this might happen."

Its voice was clear and without affect. It did not have an accent so much as an absence of accent—language spoken with the precision of someone who had learned it exactly rather than grown up with it.

"I'm ending this," Ace said.

"You're ending the contract," the Entity corrected. "Which is the end of this, yes, but the contract predates the Entity significantly. The original signing was by the town's founders. The Entity is merely the manifestation of the terms. If you end the contract, the Entity will cease to operate in this town. But the obligation will pass to the town itself. They will have whatever prosperity comes without our support. Which is something less."

"I don't care," Ace said.

"I know," the Entity said. It set down its spoon with care. "That's what makes you difficult to negotiate with. Most people care about consequences. Most people will accept one death for the survival of a hundred. Most people are pragmatists."

"Where is the document?" Ace asked.

"In a safe in the basement. We could tell you the combination. Margaret would prefer not to involve herself in its destruction. Thomas would want you to know that he disagrees with her preference, but he will not act on that disagreement. They are an old couple with a thirty-year partnership. They have learned how to coexist despite fundamental moral disputes."

The Entity stood. It was not tall—perhaps six feet, no more. But it had the kind of presence that seemed to take up space regardless of actual dimension.

"If you want to destroy the contract," the Entity said, "you will have to go through us. We are at full strength. The contract has been unbroken for sixty-three years. We have not had to defend it in that time. The last time we defended a contract was in 1974. We won that conflict. The contractor lived. We remained."

"Not this time," Ace said, and she drew her blades.

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The fight in Margaret Ashford's dining room was not the kind that left obvious damage. The Entity fought with precision and without mercy, but it did not need to wreck the space. It needed to keep Ace away from the basement. It needed to keep the contract intact.

Ace was faster. The Entity was more capable.

The difference was in the timescales. The Entity had sixty-three years of unbroken operation behind it, sixty-three years of perfect adherence to the terms, sixty-three years of absolute power in this space. It had learned to exist here with a completeness that was almost botanical—rooted deep, feeding on the certainty of obligation.

But the Entity had also forgotten what it was to fight. It had forgotten because there had been no need to remember. And fighting requires an understanding of damage that comes only from the constant possibility of being damaged.

Ace understood damage intimately.

She took a cut on her shoulder—the Entity's formality gave it precision, and precision was sharp. She bled briefly and adapted. She did not try to overpower the Entity. She moved instead into the space where it was slowest to respond: the gaps in its perfect technique where habit had been allowed to calcify into predictability.

The fight moved from the dining room to the kitchen to the hallway. Margaret stood at the top of the basement stairs, watching, her face carved from stone. Thomas stood in the living room, his hands at his sides, doing nothing.

Ace drove the Entity backward down the basement stairs. The Entity did not lose its footing—it descended with controlled precision. But descent is still retreat. Descent is still loss.

The safe was in the corner of the basement. It was old, built into the wall, the kind of safe that had been installed when the contract was written and had never needed to be moved or opened urgently since. Margaret herself did not have the combination. Only the Entity had it.

The Entity turned from Ace momentarily, stepped to the safe, and began to open it. Ace understood what was happening: the Entity was buying itself time, buying itself opportunity, retrieving the document so that they could negotiate on new ground. If it held the document, it held leverage.

Ace did not let it reach the safe. She closed the distance she had been maintaining, and she drove one blade up and inward, directly into the point where a human heart would be. The Entity turned at the last moment—fast enough to avoid the killing blow, but not fast enough to avoid the blade entirely. The katana sank through something vital enough to matter.

The Entity made a sound that was not quite speech. It staggered. It did not fall. Instead it completed its movement toward the safe, fumbled the combination, and pulled the door open with its remaining strength.

The document was inside. A single page, folded once, written in the precise hand that Ace had seen upstairs.

Ace did not try to take it from the Entity. She reached past it to the safe's interior, found the document's location, and burned it. The lighter in her pocket—she had carried fire for contract entities since the first one she'd ever killed—lit the paper at its corner. The flames took it with the eagerness of something that wanted to be alive.

The Entity made another sound. This time it was closer to a word, but not a word that existed in any language. The Entity staggered, steadied, reached toward the burning document. Ace did not let it reach. She kept the fire between them, and she watched the document blacken, curl, become ash.

When there was nothing left of the page but indecipherable carbon, the Entity began to dissolve.

It did not happen all at once. It happened in stages, as though the Entity was remembering, moment by moment, that it had never been alive and therefore could not die. But it could stop being present. It could step back across the boundary. It could exist as an idea in the space of obligation without needing to maintain a form that could hold soup.

By the time the Entity was completely gone, there was nothing left but the clothes it had been wearing, collapsed on the basement floor like the memory of a person.

Ace climbed the stairs.

Margaret and Thomas were standing in the hallway, side by side. Margaret was crying without sound. Thomas had his arm around her shoulders, which was the only intimacy Ace had ever seen him offer, and it was offered here in this moment when intimacy was the last thing that could matter.

"You've taken something from us," Margaret said.

Ace stopped at the doorway. She did not turn, but she stopped, which was acknowledgment enough to wait for the rest of it.

"We built this town with that contract," Margaret said. "We made it safe. We made it stable. We made it good. And now you've taken it away, and we don't know what happens to us."

"He has his whole life," Ace said.

"Does he?" Thomas asked. And there was genuine curiosity in his voice, not argument. "Will he have a life if the town collapses? If the school closes? If the clinic can't afford its staff? If Ashford becomes another dying place?"

"Yes," Ace said. She said it as fact, not comfort. "Whatever else happens, he will have it."

She walked toward the door.

Daniel Kessler was standing at the end of the lane outside Margaret's house. He was young—four months under twenty-five, the postmaster had told them that morning. He had dark hair and careful eyes, and he was looking at Ace with the expression of someone who knows that something has happened that they don't understand but that they will spend the rest of their life understanding.

He did not move. He did not speak. He did not ask what had happened or where the Entity had gone or why he suddenly felt the weight of obligation lift from him like a hand releasing pressure.

Ace did not speak either. She walked past him to her car. She got in. She drove, and she did not look in the mirror to watch the town disappear behind her.

But she thought of Daniel Kessler standing in the lane, and she thought of what she had given him—not life, precisely, life could have happened anyway—but the knowledge that his life was his own, purchased with the end of a contract, paid for by the dissolution of the town's prosperity.

It was the only thing she could give. It would have to be enough.

It would not be enough. It could never be enough. But it was the only currency she had: the ability to destroy what was feeding on the unwilling, and the willingness to accept the consequences of that destruction.

Behind her, in Ashford, the town continued on. The school was still there. The clinic was still there. But the certainty was gone. For the first time in sixty-three years, the future was not guaranteed. For the first time in sixty-three years, the town would have to actually work for its survival.

Thomas and Margaret stood in their house and looked at each other across the gulf that had always existed between them. Daniel Kessler walked to the diner and ordered coffee that had been made by human hands and luck rather than divine contract.

And Ace drove into the gathering night with her blades at her side and the weight of another

boundary crossed accumulating like snow in her shoulders.

There was always another hunt. There was always another entity feeding on human willingness. There was always another person who had been assigned their own death by people who loved them.

She would find them all. She would destroy the contracts that bound them. She would accept the consequences, and she would keep moving forward.

That was the work. That was the only work there was. —

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