

## # Episode 41 — What the Name Took

The town of Harrow looked different since the Name Revenant was dead.

Ace noticed it in the small things first: a man calling his daughter by her name from a doorway, the sound of it ordinary and careful, like he was practicing a dance. Children playing a game that involved saying each other's names and laughing at the sound. A woman on the street corner introducing herself to a visitor without the self-conscious pause that had once been required—just her name, unguarded, the words falling out of her mouth like something natural.

Harrow was learning to speak.

It had been nearly five years since the hunt. The Name Revenant had been the kind of entity that made people forget the words they needed—not just names, but the specific sound that held one person's entire identity. Forty years of the town living in that silence. Forty years of referring to each other through relationship or role: mother, baker, elder. The name itself was a thing that could not be spoken, and so names had become something that did not exist.

That was what the Revenant had needed: a town where identity had been unspoken, where the essential sound of self had been forcibly forgotten. It fed on that absence the way other entities fed on fear or obligation or blood. It had learned to exist in the space where language and person were no longer connected.

Ace had ended it by doing the one thing that would destroy it: she had deliberately spoken the forbidden name, had summoned the entity by using the very sound it needed to survive. And the entity had fought, and in fighting it had taken things from her that she did not yet understand were gone, because you could not miss what you could not remember.

That was the shape of the loss: a two-year period, erased. Approximately. She had reconstructed the timeline as well as she could through context and documentation. She could place herself in geographical locations during that period. She could identify the jobs she had worked on. She knew roughly where she had been and what she had been doing.

But there were gaps. Specific days that had no shape. Conversations she had surely had but could not recall. Moments that had seemed important enough to her past self to leave a mark in her present self, except the mark was negative space, the absence where something used to be.

This was why she had come back to Harrow. The postmaster had been the one who recognized her, the only person in the town who had seen Ace during the lost period. The postmaster had a small office behind the mail counter, and she had watched Ace sitting in the diner during that visit five years ago. The postmaster had seen the hiker who had stayed in Harrow for no particular reason, had observed her with the attentiveness that postal workers develop—knowing small things about people through the packages they received, the addresses they mailed to, the postcards they collected.

“You were here before,” the postmaster said now, and she was careful with the words, as if Ace's return was something that needed to be handled with precision. “Two visits. The first one about five and a half years ago. You stayed two nights.”

The postmaster's name was Eleanor. She was using it now with a slight hesitation, the way people did when they were still getting used to the weight of their own identity on their own tongue. Eleanor had been the word she had not been allowed to speak for forty years, and now she said it as if tasting it.

“What was I doing?” Ace asked.

"You were following something that turned out not to be there. A false lead. You seemed tired. More tired than usual, maybe. I didn't know you, not really, but the way you moved—you carry yourself like someone who is used to being exhausted."

That was accurate. Ace did not react to accuracy.

"I spent time in the diner," Ace said. It was not a question, but Eleanor understood it as one.

"The second night. You sat in a booth for almost two hours doing nothing in particular. Drinking coffee. Watching the door. People came and went. It was a regular evening."

"Who did I talk to?"

Eleanor hesitated. "A man. A traveler. He was passing through, like you. He was sitting at the counter. At some point you got up and went to talk to him. I don't know what you said. They talked for maybe twenty minutes. Then he left. You stayed another hour and then you went back to your room. Next morning you left the town."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know," Eleanor said. "I've thought about it a lot since then. Especially after the Name Revenant was killed and I could think clearly again. There was something about the way you talked to him. Quiet. Intent. Like whatever you were saying mattered more than anything that usually matters. And then he was gone and you were gone and it was just—" Eleanor gestured at the space where something used to be. "—nothing."

This was the shape of the loss. Not a dramatic thing. Not a great conversation or a significant moment. Just a twenty-minute conversation in a diner in a town where names had been forbidden, with a person whose identity she could not remember, about something that had been important enough to her previous self to register as absence now.

The two-year period the Name Revenant had taken had contained other things, Ace knew. Jobs. Travels. The ordinary accumulation of life. But this specific conversation was the one that had its shape still present, the negative space most visible. This was the hole she could feel most clearly.

"He was kind," Eleanor said. "That's the only thing I can tell you about him, and I'm not sure why I remember that. He was kind in the way that some people are kind without trying—just the way he treated you, the way he listened. He seemed like he was listening to something underneath what you were saying."

Ace sat in Eleanor's office, which was small and orderly and smelled of sorting and dust and time. She sat in a straight-backed chair and she did not ask any more questions, because there were no more questions that could be answered. Eleanor had given her the shape of the thing that was gone. Eleanor had shown her the outline of a memory that could not be recovered.

"I'm glad you're back," Eleanor said, and then she used Ace's name.

It was the first time anyone in Harrow had said it aloud. Ace's actual name—the one she did not often give, did not often allow to be used. Eleanor had looked it up. Eleanor had found it in the registry from that first visit, where Ace had had to write it when she took the room, and Eleanor had kept it all these years, waiting for the moment when saying names would be allowed again.

Ace said: "Thank you."

She said it because Eleanor was offering more than coffee. She was offering the recovery of something that had been taken. She was offering the acknowledgment that Ace had been present, that Ace had mattered, that Ace was known—not fully known, but known enough. Known in the space where the empty thing was sitting.

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Ace walked to the diner alone.

It was late afternoon, the light gold and thickening. The diner was the same as she remembered from the records she had seen about Harrow—red vinyl seats, a long counter, the kind of place that had existed for a long time and would exist for a long time more, because diners were the background of the world, the constant hum of coffee and toast and people passing through.

She ordered coffee and sat in the booth where Eleanor had said she had sat five and a half years ago. The booth had a view of the counter. The light from the window was warm across the tabletop.

She did not know what the man had looked like. She did not know what name he had given—probably not his real name, probably something as provisional as the passage through a town required. She did not know what they had talked about or why it had mattered or why her past self had decided it was worth remembering.

But she sat in the booth and she drank the coffee and she was present with the absence. She let the negative space have weight. She did not try to fill it. She did not try to reconstruct what was gone. She simply sat with it, the way someone sits with a photograph of a person who is dead—not looking for new information, not trying to animate the image, just acknowledging that the image is all that remains.

The diner moved around her. People came in and ordered. The cook worked the griddle. The waitress moved between tables with the practiced ease of someone who had been doing this work long enough for it to be invisible to herself.

Harrow was a small town. It would always be a small town. The person Ace had talked to five and a half years ago had probably passed through only once. He was probably gone entirely now—moved on to other towns, other diners, other conversations with people who carried invisible weight. He had been kind to her, Eleanor had said. He had listened underneath the words.

That would have to be enough. That had to be everything, actually: the knowledge that she had been heard, at some point, by someone, and that the conversation had been real even though it was now gone.

The coffee was warm. The light continued to move across the table, painting the day in slow increments toward evening. Ace was forty-three years old. She had lost two years of her life to an entity she had had to destroy. Those two years would never be recovered. But she had discovered, by returning to Harrow, that the loss had a geography. It had a location. The thing that was gone had a shape.

Sometimes that was what you could recover: not the memory, not the moment, but the precise knowledge of its absence.

She finished the coffee. She left money on the table. She stood to leave, and as she stood, the waitress came over with the coffee pot, ready to refill.

"Are you leaving already?" the waitress asked. There was nothing particular in her tone—just the professional friendliness of service. But there was also attention there, the recognition that some people stayed longer than others, and some people you noticed when they left.

"Yes," Ace said.

"Can I ask you something?" the waitress said. She was younger than Ace, maybe thirty, with tired eyes that suggested she knew more about the work of the world than most people her age. "You seem like someone who's been here before. Have you?"

"Five years ago," Ace said. "Briefly."

"I thought so," the waitress said. "There's something about the way you move. Like you've already decided where the exit is. Like you're always calculating the distance to somewhere else."

Ace did not respond. It was an accurate observation. It was also not something that needed a response.

"Just wanted to say," the waitress continued, "that whatever brought you back here, whatever you're looking for—I hope you find it."

Ace nodded, which was a way of accepting kindness from a stranger. She left the diner.

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Eleanor was closing the post office when Ace walked past on the way back to her car. Eleanor saw her and came out, locking the door behind her.

"You're leaving," Eleanor said. It was not a question.

"Yes."

"Did it help? Coming back?"

Ace considered the question. It was the kind of question that required honesty or nothing at all. "I found what was here," she said finally. "I didn't recover what was lost."

"No," Eleanor said. "You can't. Once the Name Revenant took it, it was gone. That's what those entities do—they don't just damage. They delete. They make things so that they never were."

Eleanor was using her name now, Ace realized. She had been using it throughout their conversation, consciously, deliberately. Eleanor was speaking the word that had been unspoken for forty years. Eleanor was the kind of person who would do that—would carry the weight of that reclamation, would use the name because it was the last thing the entity had tried to take.

"Thank you for coming back," Eleanor said. "It's a small thing, but it meant something to me. To the town. To have someone that we cared about in our history be known, be acknowledged. For a long time, we couldn't speak our names. Now we can. We're learning. And you showed us how to do that."

Ace was not sure that was accurate. The Name Revenant's death had shown Harrow how to speak names again. Ace had just been the vector of that death. But she did not argue the point.

"You're going to keep looking," Eleanor said. "For whatever you're hunting next."

“Yes.”

“Will you come back if you find it? If you recover something you lost, I mean. Will you come back to tell us?”

Ace did not know if she would find what was lost. The two years were gone. But there was something in Eleanor's question that was not quite about recovery. It was about return. It was about the possibility that somewhere in the chain of hunts, Ace might circle back to a place where she had mattered, where she had been seen, where she had been known.

“If I can,” Ace said.

Eleanor smiled. It was small and genuine and carried the weight of forty years of enforced silence and five years of learning to speak. Eleanor reached out and took Ace's hand, just for a moment, just long enough to make contact, to say goodbye in a way that words could not quite accomplish.

Ace drove out of Harrow as the light was fading completely. The road wound down from the town into valleys where the darkness was already beginning to accumulate. She did not play the radio. She did not talk to herself. She drove in silence, the way she did most of the time, with her blades beside her and the memory of a conversation she could not remember.

The absence would not fill. The two years would not return. But Harrow had given her something: the knowledge that the loss had weight, had reality, had been acknowledged by someone in the world who had seen her presence and could speak about it.

That was not recovery. But it was something that might, over time, become a way of carrying the weight. It was a form of bearing what could not be fixed.

Behind her, in Harrow, Eleanor went home and said her name aloud to her empty house, the way she had been learning to do. She said it as a benediction, as a prayer, as an announcement that she was real and that she had been seen by someone who had come and gone like a season.

And Ace drove into the night with her emptiness held close like something sacred, like the particular shape of loss that only the work could ever explain.

There was always another hunt. There was always another boundary. There was always another entity that needed to be destroyed.

But tonight, at least, she let the silence speak for itself. She let the absence be present without needing to fill it. She let herself be still with what was gone, and that stillness was, in its own way, a form of recovery.

Not recovery of the thing itself. But recovery of the capacity to sit with it. To acknowledge it. To carry it forward into the dark.

That was what remained. That was all that remained.

And it was enough. —

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