

## # Episode 42 — The Correspondent

The motel clerk was a woman with tired eyes and blonde hair turning gray. She said: "Package came this morning. Left at the desk. No one saw who brought it."

Ace took the envelope. Padded, cream-colored, no return address. Her name printed on it in block letters. Not her given name. A name she had never given anyone.

She climbed the stairs to her room. Three flights, worn carpet, the smell of mildew underneath the industrial lemon cleaner. Room 327. She had been here for three days. The hunt was almost finished. One more night, maybe two, and she would be gone.

The envelope was warm in her hands.

She locked the door and sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress was thin, the bedspread the color of sick institutional beige. She opened the envelope.

Photographs first. Crime scene stills from the house in Millbrook, two weeks back. The thing she had killed there was a minor demon, something that fed on small dissociations, made people lose hours at a time. She had tracked it to a suburban ranch house, gone in at midnight, left at 2:47 AM. The photographs were accurate. They showed the thing mid-manifestation, something between flesh and void, mouth open on a hinge that shouldn't exist. They showed it dead.

Then: a house fire in Dermont County. Three days ago. A possession case. She had gone in, extracted the entity, let the family escape, burned the house down to ash to make sure nothing remained. The photographs from that scene showed her silhouette against the burning frame of the front door, katana blade catching firelight, violet eyes reflecting it back like a cat's.

The photographs had been taken from inside the house.

She turned them face-down on the bed and continued. Documents now. Typed notes in the hand she recognized from the archive — precise, clinical, detached. The documentation of her movements: entry times, weapon deployment, duration of engagement, exit patterns. Every hunt reduced to operational data. Descriptions of what she killed, what she did with the bodies, how long she had looked at each corpse.

One page per hunt. Three pages for three kills.

She looked at them again. The attention to detail was extraordinary. The notes included things she had not realized could be observed—her breathing patterns during the final confrontation in Millbrook, the precise angle she had approached the burning house from in Dermont, the moment in the Castellano apartment when she had stood still for four minutes and five seconds, listening to something no one else could hear.

The Watcher's documentation had always been thorough. But the Watcher's archive was in a records office three hours away. These photographs could not have come from that archive. They were original photographs, taken on-site, during the hunts.

The Watcher had been there.

She reached the final page. It was dated yesterday. It was documentation of the current hunt—the one she was still running, the one that was supposed to finish tonight.

The documentation was incomplete. It ended at sunset yesterday. But it was complete in what it contained: a small apartment building in a working-class neighborhood. The basement. The thing she was hunting was a low-order revenant, something that had gotten trapped in the architecture of the building and was slowly spreading through the foundations. She had gone in at night. She had descended to the basement. She had found it spreading through the concrete like an infection. The pages described all of this with precision.

The documentation was yesterday's.

The Watcher had been in the basement with her yesterday.

Ace sat very still.

She had not sensed it. She had been aware of everything—the pressure-points in the basement, the thing's movements, the structural stress of the walls—and she had not felt another presence. But the Watcher was not like the things she hunted. The Watcher was something else. Something that moved through observation, that existed in documentation and distance.

But not anymore.

She read the final page again. Three times. The documentation of the basement was clinically exact, but there was something else underneath it—something almost like hesitation in the typing. As if the Watcher had considered saying something more and held back.

At the bottom of the page, below the final note about the revenant's position in the concrete, there was a single line.

The handwriting was not the Watcher's.

It was older. The letters were formed in a style that belonged to a different era—careful, formal, something from decades ago. It read: \*There are others who have carried what you carry. We have kept all of them.\*

Ace read it three times.

She put the page down. She sat in the motel room as the afternoon light moved across the wall. She did not move. She did not let her mind move either. She held the line in her head like a weight—not thinking about it, not analyzing it, just holding it still.

The Watcher had been watching from a distance. The Watcher had been in the archive, documenting her hunts after they were done. The Watcher had said: \*She knows now that I am here.\*

The Watcher had become proximity. Present at the hunts, watching close enough to see her breathing patterns, seeing how long she stood still. Sending this envelope—this cascade of evidence—to a motel in a town she had told no one about.

And then this line, in a different hand, in an older script: \*There are others who have carried what you carry. We have kept all of them.\*

Others. Plural. Not just her.

Carried what she carried. The violet eyes. The instinct. The thing that lived in her blood and made her what she was. There had been others. The Watcher had kept records of them. All of them.

She stood. She walked to the small window that overlooked the parking lot. Her vehicle was parked in the fourth space. Worn olive paint, dented along the left side, engine that ran like it had something to prove. She looked at it for a long time. She did not see anything unusual. But she knew the Watcher's capabilities extended to proximity, to presence. Knowing and seeing were not the same thing.

She left the documents on the bed. All of them. She went to the kill-zone—the basement apartment building, four miles from here—and finished the hunt methodically. No deviation. No hurry. No checking over her shoulder. If the Watcher was watching, let it watch her work.

The revenant had spread further than it had yesterday. She tracked it through the concrete, through the iron pipes, down into the bedrock beneath the building. She moved like water, like something the darkness itself had sworn not to interfere with. She found its anchor point in the foundation and drove both blades through it. The thing convulsed once and was gone.

She left the building the way she had come. She drove back to the motel as the sun set.

The envelope was still on the bed.

She picked up the final page—the one with the older handwriting—and read the line again in the fading light. \*There are others who have carried what you carry. We have kept all of them.\*

She folded the page carefully. It was old paper, the kind that had been handled many times. She put it in her jacket pocket, against her ribs. She packed the rest of the documents in a bag and left them in the back of her vehicle. She got a fresh set of keys from the clerk—a different room, the far end of the third floor—and carried her gear there.

She did not sleep.

She sat by the window of the new room and watched the parking lot. The street. The roofline of the building across the way. She did not know what she was waiting for. She did not know what the Watcher wanted. It had moved from distance to proximity. It had sent her the documentation as a message, but what was the message? That it could reach her? That it had been watching all along? That there were others, that there were records, that she was not the first?

She held the folded page against her chest and did not let her mind move toward the answers.

At dawn she paid for the motel room in cash, left no forwarding address, and drove out of town. The Watcher's package was in the back of her vehicle. The final line was in her pocket.

She did not know what came next.

But she knew, with the same certainty that let her find demons in the dark, that she was no longer the only one moving through this landscape. Something was moving toward her. Something that had been watching. Something that knew her name—the one she had never given anyone—and knew what she carried and had kept records of others who had carried the same thing.

She drove. The road stretched ahead of her into the territory she had to cross, and somewhere behind it all was the question in older handwriting: \*There are others who have carried what you carry.\*

Ace did not know the answer yet.

But she was beginning to understand the shape of the hunt.

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