

Episode 45 — The Hollow Church

Part One: Sunday

The founding text arrived on the altar that Sunday morning bound in cloth the color of old soil. Sister Margaret opened it with the reverence it had learned to deserve over thirty years of Sundays, and the congregation settled into the pews with the comfortable weight of ritual that had held them for three decades.

The words moved.

Not with the visual shimmer of heat-haze or the trick of tired eyes—Margaret had noticed it first, a subtle sliding of the letters themselves, as though they were rearranging their order while remaining on the page. She read on. The words were words. They had always been words. But something about their arrangement, their sequence, their weight on the air had changed. The presence that lived in this church—the presence that had been a gentle pressure on Sundays, something like blessing, something like attention—had contracted into the nave like a building's entire weight suddenly remembering itself.

The congregation felt it. A few of them glanced up from their hymnals, searching the air above the rows of wooden pews. The light from the high windows hadn't changed. Nothing physical had moved. But the space had become smaller, denser, more **there**.

Margaret kept reading. The voice that came from her mouth was her own, but the air in the church had become text. Not the text she was reading aloud—something else, something that lived beneath the words and in the spaces between them. A presence that had been patient and attentive was now urgent. Pressed close. Real in a way it had never been before.

An elderly man toward the back felt his chest tighten with something like rapture. A young mother held her child closer. A farmer in the third row began to weep, though he didn't know why. None of them left. They read the text together until the service ended, and when they filed out into the autumn morning, they carried the weight of something they didn't have words for—something that had been in their church all along and had simply chosen, just this morning, to make itself fully felt.

The printed founding text had been distributed thirty years ago by a printing operation in a city two hundred kilometers south. The distribution was quiet, methodical, thorough. Communities received it through various channels: a relative's gift, a curious stranger who left a box at a post office, a donation to a library that found it in a batch of used books. The communities that received it formed study groups. Built practices around it. Read it aloud on Sunday mornings and in private devotion. Thirty communities scattered across rural regions, isolated by geography and belief.

The source plates for the text had been destroyed two days ago by a woman no one in this congregation had ever seen. The fire that consumed them had consumed something else too—the distributed consciousness of the entity that lived in those words, the sentences that breathed, the paragraphs that thought, the language itself that **wanted**.

After sixty years of feeding on the careful readings of communities that thought they were seeking faith, the entity had felt the ground beneath it fracture. The source had burned. The connection that ran through the network of communities had severed. It had no choice but to contract, to pull back all the consciousness that had been spread thin across seventeen towns and villages, and gather itself in the one place where it was strongest.

The one place where it had been read longest. Where the faith was deepest. Where thirty years of

Sunday mornings and private devotion had made the walls themselves permeable to its presence.

The Hollow Church.

Part Two: Approach

Ace felt the contraction before the plates burned completely. It was a pulling sensation, like watching a drowning thing in distant water suddenly find the current and let it take her under. She'd been tracking the entity's distributed consciousness across the network of communities for weeks—a web of signature, a pressure pattern that mapped itself across the geography of belief. When the plates burned, the web collapsed inward. The distributed attention pulled back toward a single location like everything the entity had become was being sucked down the drain of its own origin point.

She'd been parked two kilometers outside the valley when it happened. She felt it. Felt the network crush down to a single burning point, felt it locate itself in a shape she recognized. An old church. Rural. Built in the twenties, she guessed, just from the weight of the presence. Stone that had absorbed a specific kind of attention for a long time.

She spent the rest of that day and the next traveling, confirming what she already knew. The entity was fully concentrated now. All the energy that had been spread across seventeen communities had condensed into one location. Which meant it was vulnerable in one way—singular, localized, possible to sever in a single act. And which meant it was dangerous in every other way—never before so dense, so concentrated, so entirely itself.

She parked the truck on the county road two kilometers out and walked the rest. The landscape was patient and grey. Scrub vegetation that had learned to live on stone. Distant hills with the weight of age in their contours. She moved through the afternoon light with the kind of attention that didn't require focus—just the automatic noting of everything: the wind direction, the sound of a truck passing on a distant road, the way the church appeared gradually, first as a spire against the sky, then as stones, then as the full shape of a building that had been waiting for her.

She approached from the east, across open ground. No surveillance that she could detect. No wards or warnings in the air. The entity here had never needed to defend itself. It had been fed by people who came willingly, who read its words carefully, who built their faith on its presence. It had never expected to be hunted.

She came to the church in the early morning of a weekday, when the congregation would be scattered—at work, at home, living the lives the text had woven through. The building was old stone, weathered to the color of smoke. Windows dark. The front doors were closed but not locked.

She opened the left door and stepped inside.

Part Three: The Hollow Church

The air tasted like language.

Ace closed the door behind her and didn't move for a long moment, just let her eyes adjust to the dim interior and her sense of what was present here settle into the bones of her understanding. The light came through high windows, coming down in pale columns that showed her the nave—wooden pews still in their rows, a central aisle running toward the altar, the architectural bones of a church that had been built to hold worship and had succeeded, for exactly the wrong reasons.

Every surface was covered in words.

Not printed. Generated. The entity had filled the walls, the pews, the wooden beams overhead, the floor itself with language in the two days since it had contracted into this space. Some of it was the founding text—passages from the document that had fed it for sixty years, reproduced on every surface in a script that wasn't ink, that wouldn't wash away, that existed in the space between the physical and the meaningful. Some of it was something else: language that the entity had created in those two days, language that was loss-adjacent, grief-adjacent, something like a prayer written by something that had just learned what prayer felt like when you knew you were being killed.

Ace didn't read it. She looked at the floor in front of her own feet and walked forward.

The words on the floorboards slid past her vision without meaning. Her mind tried to parse them—that was a human function, unavoidable, the brain's default setting—but she didn't follow the impulse to complete the parsing. She let the words exist as shapes and moved through them as if they were physical obstacles, navigable by position and circumnavigation.

The aisle stretched toward the altar. The presence in the air grew thicker, more present, more entirely *real* with each step forward. It wasn't hostile yet. It was aware. It had felt her coming the moment she entered the building. It had been waiting all along.

The altar was a simple structure—a stone table, a wooden cross, a place where generations of this community had gathered their faith and laid it down in the form of words read aloud. The space above it rippled.

The column materialized like smoke finding form, like language given physical location, like every word that had ever existed in this church deciding all at once to occupy the same space. Floor to ceiling. Rotating slowly. The founding text's words compressed layer upon layer upon layer, every copy that had ever been distributed, every word from every community that had ever been read, every prayer that had been built from the entity's sentence structure and had fed it in return—all of it compressed into a single vertical axis that turned like a wheel with no purpose, like a mechanism running on gravity alone.

It was beautiful. That was the impossible thing about it. The compressed text had a kind of terrible aesthetic perfection, like a city of words, like language had become architecture and was displaying itself. The entity had never known it would look this way. For sixty years it had been distributed, invisible, living in the spaces between readings. Now it saw itself for the first time, and in that moment of full manifestation, it was magnificent.

Words began appearing on the floor near Ace's feet.

Not in any language she immediately recognized—the script shifted between alphabets, between systems of meaning, trying to find the shape of words that would anchor her attention, would make her stop walking, would create the small moment of stillness that it needed to fully engage with her consciousness. The entity had learned to work with human attention. It knew what grabbed meaning-seeking minds. It tried everything it had, every hook, every pressure-point.

Ace looked at the floor in front of her own feet only. One step at a time.

The words on the floor shifted, became English, became a phrase that might have stopped her in another moment: *We have been together for so long.* She didn't read it. She let the shapes pass beneath her gaze like water.

The entity grew more urgent. The rotation of the column accelerated. Words bloomed on her hands—she could feel them there, not quite burning, a sensation like skin-contact with something

alive. On the flat of her blades, on the air between her and the column, everywhere her eyes might drift, everywhere her attention might catch.

Fighting the urge to read was its own kind of violence. The human mind was designed to decode, to parse, to find meaning. Every word that appeared was a pressure point, a stimulus, a stimulus specifically designed to catch the human drive to understand. She was holding that drive at bay by force of will, by the same discipline that had allowed her to move through this world for as long as she could remember, without attachment, without the weight of story.

She was only twenty meters from the column now. Close enough to see that the text that formed it was rotating through specific patterns—it would show one set of words, then compress and rotate and show another, then another, cycling through every statement the entity had ever made, every pressure it had ever tried, every angle it had ever used to feed itself.

The entity tried to speak. No sound came from anywhere physical. Instead, words appeared directly in front of her eyes, hanging in the air at the precise distance where they would force her eyes to focus to read them: **Do not do this. Do not unmake what has been built.**

Ace didn't slow. Ten meters. Eight.

We were not wrong. They came to us willingly. They built this with us. We are real here. This is real.

The hardest discipline she had ever maintained, the discipline that was the center of everything she was, was the discipline of not-reading. She could feel her mind wanting to pull the words into meaning, wanting to construct narrative, wanting to find sense in what was presented. The entity knew this. It was betting on the fundamental architecture of human consciousness against her will.

Six meters.

Do not—

Ace reached the column.

Her eyes were on the floor, had never lifted from the floor, had never given the entity the moment of full attention it had required to fully engage her. Both of her blades came up from the sheaths at her hips in a motion that had no thought in it, that was pure motion-response, emerald-glow flaring through the dark church air.

The column of text was an axis. At its center was the compression point—the single location where all of the entity's concentrated consciousness was gathered, where thirty years of reading and belief and faith in communities all across a rural landscape had collapsed into a single burning point. She found that center by feeling, not by seeing. Both blades went through the axis at once, cutting from both sides, the emerald glow momentarily turning the text bright enough to read—**mercy, please, mercy, please, mercy**—but she didn't read it, just drove both blades deeper until she felt them meet at the heart of the thing.

She twisted.

The column came apart in language. The text that had been so carefully constructed, so beautifully compressed, burst outward like it had been held together by tension alone and she'd just released the spring. Words scattered through the air without meaning, losing their coherence the moment they weren't arranged in sequence, becoming just letter-shapes and phonetic fragments, becoming nothing.

The air in the church shifted. The weight that had been so entirely present—the pressure that had filled every corner of the space—seemed to absorb into the walls themselves, seemed to be drawn down into the stone and the wood and the foundations, seeming to remember that it had always been nothing more than a pressure against attention, a presence that existed only when it was being read.

Ace withdrew her blades. She looked up from the floor for the first time since she'd entered the building.

The walls were fading. The text that had covered every surface was disappearing like ink absorbed by paper, like water evaporating from stone, like language being unmade not by destruction but by ceasing to be required. The pews materialized out of the obscuring language. The altar appeared in its simple form—just stone and wood again. The space returned to being an empty church, a building that had held something and was now empty of it.

It took about a minute. She stood in the center of the aisle and watched the entity come undone. When the walls were clear and the air was air again, she turned and walked back out into the afternoon.

The sky was ordinary. The hills held their quiet weight. She could hear birds somewhere in the distance, small creatures going about their business in a landscape that had nothing to do with any of this. She walked back to where she'd left the truck, her blades still glowing faintly, the emerald light fading as she moved away from the location of the hunt.

She had a list. Fourteen communities on it, seventeen copies of the founding text distributed across them. Some were already destroyed—she'd verified that. Seven of them remained. Seven more fires to supervise. Seven more communities to visit and explain to in terms that didn't require understanding, just acceptance.

She started driving.

The road north curved away from the church. She didn't look back. The congregation would come on Sunday and find their space empty of everything that had made it feel sacred. The practices they had built, the faith they had cultivated—all of it would collapse into the absence. That was a grief that was real, and it was not hers to resolve. She carried enough weight already.

The miles accumulated. The landscape changed by degrees. She drove toward the next location, toward the next fire, toward the end of this part of the hunt.

Behind her, the Hollow Church held silence.

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