

Episode 4 — The Red Orchard



The apple came loose in Harvin's hand with a soft sound, like the closing of a door.

He held it up to the late summer sunlight. It looked perfect at first glance — a deep red with streaks of gold, the skin taut and unblemished. The color was wrong for this time of year. Apples didn't fruit in late August. But these had. For the past three weeks, they had kept coming, dropping from the branches that had grown strange and thick.

Harvin brought the apple closer to his face.

At first, he thought there was a crack in the skin. A thin line running down the side. But as he turned it slowly, the line blinked.

His stomach seized.

It was an eye. Underneath the apple's skin, there was an eye. And it was open, and it was watching him.

Harvin dropped the apple. It fell to the dust at his feet and split open. The interior was wrong — not flesh and seeds, but something translucent and wet, with a pupil that tracked his movement even as

the fruit continued to decompose. The eye was still seeing. Still focusing on him, even in death.

He took a step backward, then another.

Around him, the orchard stretched out. Row upon row of trees, most of them old, some of them ancient, their bark thick and cracked and grey. The trees had been growing here for seventy years or more. Some of them had been growing when Harvin's father was alive. The original owner, who had planted them before Harvin was born, had told him once that some of the root systems went down forty meters. Deep. Impossibly deep.

The newer fruit hung from the branches in clusters. Red apples, all of them. All of them perfectly formed. All of them, Harvin understood with a kind of paralyzed certainty, full of eyes.

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He had been feeling sick for six weeks.

At first, it was just the heat. Late summer in the agricultural regions brought heat like a hand pressing down on your chest. He had work to do, though. The orchard didn't maintain itself. He had pruned the diseased branches — there had been a lot of them — and burned them in the yard. He had treated the soil with the same compounds his father had used. He had done everything right.

But the sickness had persisted.

He would wake exhausted, as if he hadn't slept at all. His skin had become pale. His hands trembled when he held them out in front of him, as if they didn't quite belong to him anymore. He had lost weight. His clothes hung from him now like fabric on a scarecrow.

The doctor in town — when he had finally made the journey — had examined him and found nothing. "You're not eating right," the doctor said. "You're working too hard. Farmers always do this to themselves. Rest. Eat. You'll recover."

But Harvin knew better. Something was being drawn out of him. He could feel it, happening slowly, like a long-term theft. His strength was leaving. His coherence was fragmenting. The world seemed to be moving away from him, and he was struggling to keep his focus on it.

He would stand in the orchard and forget why he had come. He would find himself hours later, still standing in the same place, unable to remember what he had been thinking about. His days had become disconnected. He was living in fragments.

Now, looking at the eye inside the apple, he understood.

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Ace arrived at the orchard on a day when the sky was the color of copper. She approached from the south, walking along the fence line. The property was isolated — there were no other houses visible from here, no smoke from neighboring chimneys, no sound of distant work. Just the orchard, spreading backward into the distance, trees upon trees upon trees, all of them drooping under the weight of their strange fruit.

A man was working in the western grove.

He was tall once, Ace understood, but he moved like something that had been wound down. His

movements were slow, disconnected. He seemed to be checking the apples on a particular tree, setting aside the ones that felt ripe, placing them in a crate at his feet.

"Harvin," Ace called out.

The man looked up. His eyes were glassy. His expression was blank.

"I'm Ace," she said. "A hunter. I've come about the orchard."

Harvin stared at her for a long moment. Then he went back to his work. "Nothing's wrong with the orchard," he said. His voice was thin. Distant. "Everything's fine. Everything's perfect. The fruit has never been better."

Ace moved into the grove. As she walked, she was noting details. The way the branches moved slightly, even though there was no wind. The way the leaves seemed to follow her movement. The soil beneath her feet was rich and dark and wrong somehow — it was too warm, even though the sun wasn't particularly strong. She knelt and pressed her palm against it.

The earth was alive. Not in the normal sense. But there was something in it, something aware, something that reacted to her presence. She could feel it pressing back against her hand, gentle and curious.

She stood and approached Harvin.

"How long," she asked.

"Six weeks," Harvin said without looking at her. "Maybe longer. I don't remember now. The days run together. But the fruit came six weeks ago. That's when things started to feel right."

"Show me the eyes," Ace said.

Harvin turned and really looked at her then. There was the briefest flicker of something in his glassy eyes — alarm, maybe. Or hunger. "You can see them. The eyes."

"Show me," Ace repeated.

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The oldest trees were in the center of the orchard. They were massive, their trunks three meters around, their canopies stretching out like dark umbrellas. The fruit here was different. It was larger, and the eyes inside were wider, more active. Ace plucked one from a low branch and split it open with her thumbnail.

The eye inside was the size of a man's eye. It rolled in its socket, tracking her. Around the pupil, the flesh was too pink, too vascular. It was a piece of a living thing, growing inside the fruit.

"What is it?" Harvin asked. He was standing several meters away now, as if being close to her caused him distress.

"Something that's taken root," Ace said. "Literally. It's using the tree system as a body. The fruit is how it sees. How it senses the world. How it reproduces."

"Is it parasitic?" Harvin asked. His voice was hollow.

“Yes.”

“It hasn't hurt anything,” Harvin said. His hands trembled. “The fruit is good. The trees are healthy. I'm... I'm fine. I'm just tired. It's just the heat.”

Ace didn't respond. She was studying the largest tree — the one at the very center of the grove. Its trunk was massive, its bark thick and rough. At its base, the roots had buckled the earth, pushing up through the soil in thick, grey roots that looked almost like veins. The roots were still moving, still slowly repositioning themselves.

She knelt and began to dig.

The soil came up easily, as if it wanted to be disturbed. As she dug deeper, the roots became larger, more complex. They were interconnected, woven together in a network that made her think of a nervous system. When she touched one of them, it contracted, pulling away. When she pressed harder, the entire tree shuddered. The branches above rustled, though there was still no wind.

And in the distance, behind Harvin, every other tree in the orchard shuddered in sympathy.

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The Orchard Thing didn't have a center. Or rather, it was all center. The mycelium network ran through every root, every tree, every growing thing in this place. What she was seeing in the oldest tree was just the thickest connection, the place where the infection had begun. But the infection was total. The orchard wasn't being controlled by something separate. The orchard had become the thing. The thing had become the orchard.

Ace stood and looked at Harvin.

“I'm going to need to burn this,” she said.

Harvin's hands curled into fists. “No.”

“It's dying you slowly. When it's finished with you, it will find another host. Another person to work the land. It will spread through farming connections, trade routes, other orchards. It will cover everything.”

“No,” Harvin said again, but the word had changed. It wasn't a refusal. It was a plea.

“It's already controlling you,” Ace said. “You can feel it. The way your thoughts aren't quite your own. The way you move. The way you're being eaten from the inside. That's what it does. It doesn't kill the host quickly. It makes the host want to continue working, to keep the orchard healthy, even as it's being consumed.”

Harvin's face crumpled. “I don't want to die,” he said. “I've lived here my whole life. This is my home.”

“You're already dead,” Ace said. “The Orchard Thing is just taking its time harvesting you.”

She turned and walked back toward the house. Behind her, Harvin made a sound like an animal in pain.

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The barn was full of tools. She found what she needed quickly — a large metal drum, kerosene,

matches, a hatchet. She spent the next hour felling the oldest trees, chopping them down from the base, hacking at their roots to separate them from the ground.

The trees fought her.

Branches moved when they shouldn't move. A root shot up from the ground, quick as a whip, and wrapped around her ankle. She cut through it with her katana. The blade came away with that clear, phosphorescent fluid on it — the tree-creature's blood, or sap, or something in between.

When the fifth tree fell, the entire orchard convulsed.

Every branch on every remaining tree moved at once, reaching upward and then downward, as if the thing was convulsing, having a seizure. The fruit dropped from the branches in a cascade — thousands of apples, all falling at once, their eyes open and rolling in every direction as they fell. They hit the ground with wet sounds, split open, and the eyes inside continued to track movement, continued to see, even in the process of decomposing.

Harvin was running toward her.

He was fast, or the Orchard Thing was fast. Harvin's body moved with a velocity his deteriorated state should not have allowed. His mouth was open, and his voice was no longer entirely his own — underneath his voice there was something deeper, something that sounded like root systems stretching, like the creaking of wood, like the slow movement of growth.

"Stay," it said, speaking through him. "Remain. Grow with us. Become root. Become fruit. Become eternal."

Ace sidestepped him and continued chopping. She was working on the sixth tree now, hacking at the base until the trunk weakened, then pushing the whole thing over. Each tree that fell sent another convulsion through the orchard. The ground buckled. Roots erupted from the soil like pythons, reaching for her, for Harvin, for anything that moved.

She cut through them all.

"Stop," Harvin sobbed. "Please. You don't understand. It's not evil. It's just... it's just hungry. It's just trying to live. Why do you have to kill it?"

"Because what it feeds on is people," Ace said. She was panting now, but her hands were steady. "And when it's done feeding on you, it will move on to someone else."

She had felled the ninth tree when the roots truly began to fight back.

They came up from everywhere at once, a writhing network of thick, grey tentacles covered in the suction marks of feeding mouths. One wrapped around her wrist and began to pull. She felt the grip tightening, felt something trying to draw out of her the same way it had drawn something out of Harvin. She pulled free, leaving a line of burned skin where the root had touched her, and brought her katana down on it in a clean cut.

The tree-creature screamed. The sound came from everywhere — from the remaining trees, from the earth itself, from Harvin's mouth as he stood watching. It was a sound of pain and rage and hunger all combined, the sound of something that had been feeding safely for months and couldn't understand why its food source had suddenly turned violent.

Ace dropped the hatchet and drew her second katana. She moved into the grove, and she became what she was — a hunter, a killer, something that understood the grammar of violence the way other people understood speech.

She cut down the remaining trees. She severed roots as thick as her own body. She moved with a speed that seemed to make the world around her slow down. When branches reached for her, she cut them. When roots wrapped around her legs, she severed them. The phosphorescent sap of the thing covered her hands, her clothes, burned against her skin. But she didn't slow.

Harvin tried to stop her once. He threw himself at her, and for a moment Ace thought she would have to kill him. But he was so fragile, so depleted. She simply grabbed him and threw him to the ground. He didn't get back up. He lay there, weeping, his glassy eyes rolling back and forth.

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The oldest tree was the last.

It was the source. Even the Orchard Thing understood this. All of its remaining energy moved through its root system toward that one, final tree. The roots around it became thicker, became more violent. They erupted from the ground in a nest of writhing, seeking tentacles.

Ace poured the kerosene at the base and lit it.

The fire caught slowly at first. The thing fought the flame, pulling moisture up through its roots to dampen the wood. But Ace kept the fire fed. She threw every piece of fallen wood on top of the flames. She used the hatchet to hack open the trunk, exposing the dry interior to the fire. She burned it methodically, without mercy.

The tree-creature died slowly.

It took hours. The screaming went on for all of those hours, a sound that seemed to come from deeper than the ground, deeper than even the oldest roots. It was a sound like the earth itself learning pain. When the roots finally stopped moving, when the last branches finally fell still, when the trunk had burned down to ash and charcoal, the silence that followed was absolute.

Ace continued burning.

She worked through the night, making sure that every tree that had been infected was reduced to ash. She burned the fruit. She burned the fallen branches. She dug up the largest roots and burned those too. By dawn, the orchard was gone. What had been a productive farm was now a wasteland of scorched earth and ash.

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Harvin was still alive.

He was sitting where she had thrown him, his back against a tree that she had felled but not yet burned. He was staring at nothing. His glassy eyes had begun to clear slightly, but there was nothing behind them — no consciousness, no hope, nothing that suggested a person lived behind those eyes anymore.

“Will you recover?” Ace asked.

Harvin's mouth moved, but no sound came out.

“The thing is dead,” Ace said. “But I don't know if you'll survive what it took from you.”

She built a small shelter for him — a lean-to from fallen branches. She left him there with water and the last of the preserved food she carried. She left him in the ash where his entire life had been.

She didn't say goodbye. There was nothing to say.

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Ace left the property before the sun reached its zenith.

Behind her, the Red Orchard was gone. The fire had burned away everything that was infected, everything that had been feeding on human flesh under the guise of fruit. The land was scorched and would not grow anything for years.

In the ruins, Harvin sat very still and tried to remember what it felt like to be alive.

The nearest town was several kilometers away. Ace could reach it by evening. There might be questions. There might be a search, eventually, when someone wondered what had happened to the farmer. But she would be gone by then. She was always gone by then.

The world was full of things that wore the shape of the natural world while feeding on people. A tree. A woman's face. A shadow that didn't match its body. An identity that belonged to someone who had just died. An orchard full of eyes.

Ace moved through that world like a knife through cloth, cutting away the things that had no right to exist.

She didn't think about the farmer in the ruins. She didn't think about anything at all.

Behind her, the sky turned the color of copper once more, and the ash drifted down like slow snow, covering everything.

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