

Episode 1 — The Chapel That Eats Prayers



Part One: The Drawing

The old man had not planned to go to the chapel. His name was Gregor, though that hardly mattered anymore. What mattered was the feeling in his chest—a pull, soft at first, like a rope wound around his ribs being drawn taut by hands he could not see.

He stood in his cottage, tea cooling on the wooden table. The liquid had gone gray. Outside, pine smoke curled from other chimneys in the village of Kestrel's Hollow. Outside, the world was cold and declining toward winter. Outside, none of it mattered.

The pull came again.

Gregor rose. His knees protested. He was seventy-three. The mountain winters had worn him down to bone and habit, and he had made his peace with that long ago. But the feeling in his chest was not his own. It felt like something vast reaching down into his small body and saying *Come.*

His coat hung by the door. He put it on without thought. His hands moved on their own, and he observed them with the strange detachment of a man watching someone else's life unfold. The path to the chapel was overgrown now. Hardly anyone went there. The stone church sat on the edge of the

village, where the forest pressed in and the sky seemed lower, heavier with clouds that never quite broke.

The pain in his chest became something else as he walked—not pain but yearning. A hunger that was not for food. A thirst that was not for water. It felt like a hand reaching toward him in the dark, kind and warm and inevitable.

His feet knew the way. The path rose slightly, winding through pine trees that seemed to lean inward, their needles exhaling a scent that was almost like incense. Almost like prayer. Almost like his mother's hands on his head when he was a child, blessing him before sleep.

The chapel emerged from the gray light like a memory surfacing.

It was small—never a cathedral, just a place where miners had once come to worship before the mines went dry. Stone walls, weathered to the color of old bone. A roof that still held. Windows dark from the inside. The door hung open, though Gregor could not recall it being open the last time he saw it. When was that? A month ago? A year? Time had become unreliable.

He entered.

The air inside was thick and warm, and it smelled of honey and roses and the perfume of something burning on the altar. Candles stood in rows, all lit, though there was no one here to light them. Their flames burned straight and steady, without flicker, without variation. They smelled of beeswax and something sweeter—something that made Gregor's throat close.

The walls...

The walls were covered in writing.

It was not on the stone. It seemed to exist **within** the stone itself—words that appeared and disappeared, overlapping and shifting. As he looked closer, he realized they were prayers. His prayers. Prayers he had spoken as a child, before the world had worn away his faith. Prayers that had no answer. Prayers that had left him hollow.

“Yes,” the chapel seemed to say, and the word was not audible but felt—felt inside his bones, his teeth, his blood.

Gregor walked to the altar. The space before it was open, and on the floor was a mark—a stain, or perhaps a deliberate design—that seemed to draw the eye. Behind the altar, in the space where a priest would have stood to deliver a sermon, the air shimmered and bent.

It was beautiful.

There were no words for what he saw. It was light, but not light. It was a shape, but it had no fixed geometry. It was golden and vast and infinitely kind, and as he looked at it, Gregor felt all his years of doubt and pain and loneliness begin to dissolve.

Come closer, it called, and his feet moved.

Kneel, and he knelt, and his joints sang with something like joy.

Pray, and his lips opened and words poured out—decades of words, of longing, of desperate belief that the world meant something, that his suffering meant something, that he was not simply dust

waiting to settle.

As he prayed, he felt himself unraveling. Not in pain. In relief. The golden light wrapped around him like arms, and he understood that this was what he had been searching for all his life. This presence. This certainty. This absolute absence of doubt.

He did not notice when his voice stopped moving his throat.

He did not notice when his body began to dissolve.

He noticed only the warmth, the absolute and infinite warmth, and the sense of being consumed by something that loved him, that had always loved him, that was, in fact, the only real thing he had ever encountered.

When the morning came, the chapel sat empty again. The candles burned on. The walls continued their endless flowing of prayers, and at the altar, new stains had dried on the stone.

In the village, in the cottage with the gray tea on the table, no one would wonder about Gregor for several more days.

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Part Two: The Arrival

The village of Kestrel's Hollow was dying.

Ace could smell it in the air—not rot, exactly, but the quiet stench of something closing. A place where the living were becoming fewer, and the dead were forgotten in neat increments.

She had come because of a report. A single piece of paper, passed through three traders and a monk from the city, that mentioned people going missing from a remote mountain village. Mentions were rare. Most people who disappeared went unrecorded. Whole families could be taken and no one would speak of it beyond a season.

But someone had mentioned it. And mentions were her work.

The dirt road into Kestrel's Hollow was barely wide enough for a cart. Pine forest pressed in from both sides, and the sky above was the gray of old iron. Ace's breath came white and small in the cold air. Her two katanas hung at her sides—emerald light dancing faintly along the blade edges, visible only if you knew to look.

She was one hundred and twenty centimeters tall. Violet eyes. Black hair with a faint violet sheen, like oil on dark water. Everything about her seemed designed to be overlooked, until the moment you could not look away.

The houses of Kestrel's Hollow were built in the old style—stone and timber, steep roofs to shed snow, shutters that had not been opened in weeks. Smoke rose from four chimneys. Ace counted as she passed: the cottage with the red door, the larger structure with the goats, the place with the barrels of salted fish. Four families left. Perhaps twenty people, if children were counted.

No one watched her from the windows.

She found the village center—if so sparse a collection of buildings could be called a center. A well, covered. A marketplace structure, empty. A small shrine, which looked more maintained than the

other buildings.

A woman emerged from one of the houses. Middle-aged, with eyes that flinched from direct contact.

"We don't—" the woman said, then stopped. Some instinct seemed to war inside her. "You're not from here."

"No," Ace said. It was sometimes necessary to speak. She did not waste words.

"There's nothing here you want." The woman's voice shook slightly. "A hunter, maybe? The hunting is good in the outer forest. You should go there."

"People are missing," Ace said. Not a question.

The woman's face went pale. "Who told you? Who—"

"Where do they disappear?" Ace asked.

The woman's jaw moved without sound. Her eyes flicked in one direction, then away—up the path that wound between the houses, where the forest became denser, where the mountain pressed higher. Where something sat on the edge of the village like a tooth about to bite.

"The chapel," the woman whispered. "They go to the chapel. But they don't... they don't mean to. They just go. And then..."

"And then?" Ace prompted, though her eyes were already moving up the path.

"Then they're gone. And the rest of us..." The woman hugged herself. "We feel it sometimes. When we sleep. A warmth. A voice calling us. We've tried to forbid anyone from going near it, but the pull is too strong. One of them—old Marta—she walked there in the middle of the night, in nothing but her nightdress. In the snow. We found her clothes in the morning, just laid out on the chapel steps, folded neat. But she—she never came back."

Ace had turned toward the path. "How many?"

"Seven," the woman said. "Over three months. Always the chapel."

Ace nodded once and moved toward the path without another word.

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Part Three: The Approach

The chapel announced itself through the trees before Ace could see it clearly.

The smell came first—honey and roses, with an undertone of something burning. The air temperature rose as she climbed. Not warmer in a natural way. It was the heat of a space that held something alive and breathing, that was generating warmth from its own presence.

Then the light, seeping through the trees.

The chapel was small, built of pale stone that seemed to glow faintly from within, as if lit from behind. The windows, which should have been dark, burned with warm golden light. Candles. Dozens of them.

Ace stopped at the edge of the clearing and assessed.

The building was approximately two hundred years old, maybe more. The stone showed the kind of weathering that suggested it had stood for a long time with minimal maintenance. The roof was intact. The door hung open. The clearing around it was wide enough that nothing could approach from behind the building without being seen from the windows—if anything inside was looking.

But nothing was looking. Nothing seemed aware of her yet.

She moved forward carefully, her footsteps making no sound on the frost-stiff grass. As she drew closer, she could see details.

The candles inside were numerous, arranged in rows that suggested order, ritual. The walls, visible through the windows, were covered in marks—writing, perhaps, though it seemed to move as she watched. The ground around the base of the chapel was clear of leaves, almost swept, and the stone showed patterns of darker stains that could have been water or could have been something else.

The air smelled sweeter the closer she got. Sweeter and thicker, and underneath it all, a subtle note of decay masked by perfume.

She reached the open door.

The interior of the chapel was not what the exterior suggested. It should have been small—a tight space, no more than a dozen meters on any side. But the interior seemed to recede further than architecture should allow. The candlelight seemed to stretch, to extend backward, as if the chapel was much larger inside than out.

The walls were covered in writing.

Ace stepped inside. The warmth hit her like a physical thing, and her eyes adjusted to the brightness of the candles. The writing on the walls became clearer for a moment, then shifted again, the letters rearranging themselves, dissolving and reforming. Words in multiple languages. Words that looked like prayers.

No sign of bodies. No bones. No remains.

Whatever was here did not leave the evidence of its feeding.

The altar stood at the far end of the chapel, and above it, the air seemed to thicken. Not distorted in the way heat warp might distort, but thick with presence. Something was watching from that direction. She could not see it, but she could feel it the way she could feel a predator's attention.

Ace moved forward slowly, her hand resting on the hilt of one katana. The emerald light along the blade brightened slightly in response to her alertness.

The altar was made of stone, and it was stained.

The stains formed a pattern—not random spatter but deliberate design. A circle within a circle, with marks that might have been words or might have been something else. Around the pattern, the stone was clean. The chapel should have been dusty. It wasn't. It was immaculate.

The presence in the air grew stronger.

Ace did not try to resist it or fight it. She simply observed. The warmth wrapped around her like the

attention of something vast. It was trying to pull her toward the altar, to draw her into the space above it where the air thickened.

She was perhaps the smallest thing it had ever tried to lure.

Come, the presence seemed to say, and the word was not in her ears but in her bones, her blood, her thoughts.

Ace's hand tightened on the katana hilt.

"No," she said quietly.

The presence convulsed.

For just a moment, the walls of the chapel flickered. The writing on them stopped moving. The golden light from the candles dimmed. And in that instant, Ace saw what the chapel really was—not a building but a cocoon, a body, a chrysalis holding something that had learned to wear the shape of faith.

Then the pressure returned, doubled, tripled. The candles flared bright enough to hurt her eyes. The air filled with a sound that was not sound—a vibration that rattled her teeth, that made her vision blur.

Ace drew both katanas in one smooth motion.

The blades sang as they emerged, the emerald light flaring bright enough to cast sharp shadows across the stone. The presence in the chapel recoiled violently.

Leave, it hissed, and this time the word carried violence. *Leave or be unmade.*

Ace moved toward the altar.

The response was immediate and terrible.

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Part Four: The Hunt

The chapel erupted.

The golden light coalesced from the thin air, forming a column that rose from behind the altar and filled the entire space with warmth and terrible beauty. It was not a creature that could be wounded in any conventional way. It was a force, a hunger made manifest, something that had learned to wear prayer like skin.

The first strike came in the form of light itself. It reached for her like hands, and where it touched the stone of the chapel, the floor cracked. Where it touched the air near her, the space seemed to burn.

Ace was already moving.

She ran toward the altar, her footsteps soundless, her vision locked on the point where the light was densest. The golden column swayed toward her, and she could feel its hunger—the way it had felt Gregor's desperation, Marta's loneliness, the hunger of all seven people it had drawn into this place.

It tried to touch her mind, to find some wound it could pour itself into.

Ace's mind was a thing like her body—small, efficient, and extraordinarily hard to break.

She pivoted, rolling beneath the reaching light, and came up beside the altar. The sword in her right hand was already moving, already burning with emerald fire, and she drove it downward with all her strength.

The blade struck not flesh but something that had the consistency of oil and the resistance of stone. The impact sent a shock through her arm that nearly dislocated her shoulder, but the emerald light of the sword flared bright. Where the blade touched whatever the Faith Parasite really was, the golden light shrieked.

The sound was not physical. It tore across her consciousness like broken glass.

Ace twisted the blade and pulled back, preparing for a second strike, but the entity moved. The light coalesced, reformed, and struck toward her with a ferocity that spoke of wounded hunger. It wrapped around her chest and arms, burning without heat, and Ace felt the pull—the terrible, beautiful pull to surrender, to kneel, to believe in something.

She did not believe.

Instead, she drove her left blade up through the light, and the emerald fire cut through it like a knife through silk. The golden presence scattered, but only for a moment. It was not bound by the same rules that governed flesh and bone. It could be wounded, but those wounds seemed to close almost immediately.

The chapel itself began to shake.

Cracks appeared in the stone walls, spreading from the point where Ace had first struck. The candles flickered and then went out, all at once, plunging the chapel into darkness that only the emerald glow of her blades could pierce.

Ace understood then.

The chapel and the entity were the same thing. They were not separate. The building was not a shell around a monster but a symbiosis—the Faith Parasite had fused with the structure itself, had grown roots into the stone, had become inseparable from it.

She could not kill the entity without destroying the chapel. And she could not kill the chapel without destroying the entity.

The golden light made one more attempt, a final desperate surge toward her, and Ace answered it with both blades crossed and thrust forward. The emerald light flooded out from her swords in a wave, and the entity convulsed.

The walls of the chapel cracked open.

Cold air rushed in, the smell of pine and frost, and in that moment of disruption, Ace made her decision.

She ran.

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Part Five: The Burning

The chapel was collapsing from the inside as Ace emerged into the cold air. The golden light had already begun to spill out through the cracks, and it was dissipating into nothing, dying as the building that contained it fell apart.

She ran a perimeter around the structure, her mind already calculating. The roof had begun to buckle. The walls were fracturing. Within minutes, the entire chapel would collapse inward.

But collapse was not enough.

Ace had been carrying supplies since she left the last town—flint, steel, oil-soaked cloth bundled in a leather satchel. She went to the eastern wall, where the cracks were widest, and stuffed the oil-soaked cloth deep into the largest gap. The chapel was old wood and old stone, and the air inside smelled like honey and roses and something burning.

It would burn.

She struck flint and steel. Once. Twice. The third time, the spark caught the oil-soaked cloth, and the flame took hold.

The fire spread with an eagerness that suggested the chapel itself was hungry to burn. It climbed up through the cracks, and where it touched the golden light that was still lingering, that light writhed and died. The entity made one last sound—not a scream but something deeper, a vibration of existence ceasing.

Ace watched from a distance as the chapel burned.

The flames were orange and red and natural, and they consumed the stone as if it had always been meant to be consumed. The structure collapsed inward, the roof caving first, then the walls following. By the time the fire had burned through everything, there was nothing left but ash and blackened stone.

The air, gradually, began to smell normal again.

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Part Six: The Aftermath

The village of Kestrel's Hollow was quiet as Ace descended the path from where the chapel had been.

The woman who had spoken to her before was standing in the center of the village, staring upward. Other villagers emerged from their houses, pulling their coats close. They could see the smoke. They could see the glow of the fire against the clouds.

They could feel something changing. Some pressure that had been wound tight inside them for three months was suddenly released.

The woman's eyes tracked Ace as she passed.

"You burned it," the woman said. Not a question.

"Yes," Ace said.

“What was it? In there? What took them?”

Ace paused. The woman was looking at her with an expression that was not quite gratitude and not quite terror—something in between, something that recognized that the world contained things that neither science nor prayer could explain.

“Something that fed on faith,” Ace said. “It's gone now.”

She did not add that it was gone only because she had burned it to ash. She did not explain the mechanism. There was no point. Understanding did not change what had happened.

The woman nodded slowly. “Thank you,” she said, and the words seemed to cost her something—a kind of surrender to the idea that help could come from outside, that the world was not entirely controlled by the hunger of forgotten places.

Ace continued down the road without responding.

Behind her, the village of Kestrel's Hollow would slowly begin to breathe again. The surviving people would feel the pull fading from their dreams. New people might eventually move in to replace those who had been taken. The chapel would remain as ash and blackened stone, and eventually grass would grow over it, and children would tell stories about the place where the old chapel had burned.

None of those stories would be quite true. None of them would be entirely false.

Ace walked back toward the forest trail that would lead her down the mountain, her katanas dark again, the emerald glow fading as the hunt concluded. The cold air cut at her face, and her breath came white and small.

She would walk through the night. By morning, she would be gone from Kestrel's Hollow entirely.

By the time anyone came looking for answers, there would be nothing to find but ash and silence and the ordinary human tendency to forget.

She did not think about the seven people who had gone to the chapel. She did not think about what they had felt, what they had believed in their final moments. That was not her work.

Her work was only this: to find the thing that fed, and to kill it. The rest was silence.

The road down the mountain was cold and dark and narrow, and Ace followed it without hesitation, without fear, moving like a shadow into the larger darkness of the world.

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