

## Episode 7 — Knife for the Neverborn



### Part One: The Reaching

The clearing was old enough that the grass had given up. What grew there now was something else—pale, phosphorescent in darkness, not quite grass and not quite fungus. The seven cultists stood in their marked positions, their voices creating a drone that had been continuous for seventy-two hours. No breaks. No sleep. They had been chosen because they could endure this. Because their dedication was absolute.

Marcus, who had been the accountant in his previous life, stood at the northern stone. His voice was hoarse but steady. The words weren't in any language that had a name anymore. They were older than that. They were the language of things that existed in the space before birth, before form, before the terrible clarity of existence itself.

The stones around the clearing glowed faintly—not with light, but with the absence of light, as if they were drinking it. The sigil carved into the central stone had been deepened by a hundred ritualists over three months. It ran with blood that had stopped being blood some time ago. Now it was something else. Currency. Payment.

Sarah, to the east, felt tears running down her face. She didn't know why she was crying. She hadn't

slept, and her body was moving on something that wasn't quite consciousness anymore. But she could feel it. Everyone could feel it.

It was coming.

The thing between realms, the thing that had never been born because birth was a cage and it refused cages—it was pressing against the thin place. The cult had spent three months convincing it that on this side, it would be different. On this side, it would be free. They had shown it their belief. They had fed it their hunger for transcendence, their desperate need to be part of something larger than their individual failures and disappointments.

The Neverborn Fragment had listened.

For weeks, it had pressed gently against the boundary. But as the seventy-second hour approached, the pressure increased. The air in the clearing had started to collapse inward. Distance became strange. The cultists could look at their hands and see them as if from a great remove, as if their own limbs belonged to someone else, observed through a long tunnel. Time moved wrong. A second lasted forever. A minute passed in the space between breaths.

Thomas, at the western position, opened his eyes and immediately regretted it. The sky above the clearing was no longer sky. It was a thickness, a substance, a wrongness that had texture without being anything that should exist. He started to scream, but his voice came out backwards—he heard the end of the sound before the beginning.

The central stone trembled.

The sigil blazed with light that was not light.

Something was pushing through.

Marcus felt his mind starting to tear at the seams. This was the moment of transcendence they had been promised. This was the breaking open of the self, the dissolution into something vast and—

The forest at the clearing's edge erupted with the sound of movement.

The cult's focus shattered like glass.

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## **Part Two: The Arrival**

Ace had been tracking the energy disturbance for six days. It left traces like a wound bleeds—subtle but unmistakable to those who knew how to read them. Dead animals arranged in spirals at the forest's edge. Plants twisted into patterns that nature didn't make. And underneath all of it, the sensation of something pressing against reality, testing for weaknesses.

She had come through the deep woods, moving between the massive old-growth trees like a ghost. No noise. Her emerald katanas were already drawn—one in each hand, the blades catching what little moonlight penetrated the canopy. In the three weeks since she'd last slept, she'd tracked seven different traces of ritual activity. Four had been false leads. Two had been resolved—small magics, easily disrupted, the casters disposed of. This one had the weight of something serious.

This one felt like hunger.

The wrongness of the forest had become acute as she approached. The ground beneath her feet was too warm. The air tasted like copper and something else, something like the space behind your eyes when you press on them hard enough. The birds had stopped singing three kilometers back. The insects had stopped moving. Even the wind had stopped pretending to be natural.

She emerged at the forest's edge and saw the clearing.

Immediately, her vision swam. The geometry of the space was wrong in a way that made her teeth ache. The stones were arranged in a pattern that her eyes couldn't follow—they seemed to rearrange themselves whenever she wasn't looking directly at them. And at the center, where the cultists stood in their marked positions, the air was collapsing.

Ace didn't hesitate.

She moved into the clearing with speed that would have seemed impossible to anyone watching. Her body understood what her mind was still processing—the ritual was incomplete, but it was close. Whatever was on the other side of that tear was almost real enough to touch.

The cultists registered her presence only when she was among them.

Marcus, the accountant turned true believer, saw the small figure moving between his brothers and sisters with terrible purpose. For a moment, confusion flickered across his exhausted face. Then understanding arrived, and with it, a protective instinct. This was not supposed to be interrupted. They had come too far. The god—no, the fragment, the piece of infinite potential—it had been promised. It had been fed.

“No,” Marcus said. His voice was still hoarse from seventy-two hours of chanting, but it carried a note of absolute certainty. “You cannot.”

Ace's response was to move past him and drive one blade directly through the nearest cultist—a young woman named Keisha, who had joined the movement because she wanted to matter. The blade passed through her easily, and she fell without time to scream.

The others broke formation.

This was the mistake the ritual could not recover from. The sustained attention of the group was the anchor. The collective will was the tether keeping the Fragment interested, keeping it pressed against the boundary instead of sinking back into the spaces between things. As the cultists abandoned their positions—some to run, some to try to fight, all to save their own skins—the ritual framework crumbled.

But not before something came through.

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### **Part Three: The Wrongness**

The tearing sound was not a sound. It was the absence of sound, and the absence itself was loud. Ace felt it in her chest cavity, in the space behind her eyes, in the small hollow place at the base of her skull where thought originated.

What emerged was not anything she could describe, because description required form, and this thing had none. It was a void in the shape of something trying desperately to be real. It was the idea

of pain, given pressure. It was the concept of wrongness, made manifest through sheer force of will.

It had eyes that were not eyes, and they found her immediately.

The thing that had never been born understood instantly what it was looking at. Not a cult member. Not one of the carriers of its hope and belief. A predator. An interruption. And it turned its terrible, formless attention toward her with the fury of something that had been so close to existence that having it stolen away felt like murder.

Ace moved sideways, her body responding to danger in the way it always did—with speed and precision. Her blades came up, angled to cut, and she struck at the approaching void.

The katanas passed through it as if cutting smoke, but the smoke screamed.

The sound was not something heard with ears. It was something that happened in the space where hearing was supposed to be. Ace felt her vision go dark at the edges. For a moment that lasted too long, she was experiencing time backwards—she saw herself entering the clearing, saw the cult chanting, saw the moment the door opened, all in reverse. Her stomach twisted. Her inner ear went haywire. She was falling and rising simultaneously.

The cultists who were still conscious watched in horror. This had not been part of the bargain.

Marcus tried to restart the chant, his voice cracking. Sarah was already running, crashing through the phosphorescent grass toward the forest edge. Thomas had collapsed, his mind unable to process the geometry of what was now partially real.

Ace pulled herself back into linear time through sheer force of will. Her vision cleared. Her focus narrowed to a point. The thing was reaching for her, appendages of non-being stretching through space, and she could see that it was trying to pull her into that same backwards place, that same senseless arrangement of causality.

She had fought things made of flesh and bone. She had fought constructs of pure magic, binding circles rendered mobile, the will of sorcerers made manifest. She had never fought something that wasn't quite real, something that existed in the category of things that should not exist.

It occurred to her that conventional approaches would not work.

The sigil. The central stone. The ritual anchors. They were the tether.

She broke her engagement with the Fragment by moving fast and low, rolling under the reaching void, and came up at the central stone. The sigil was carved deep—seven symbols that hurt to look at, that made the brain want to slide off them like soap. The accumulated ritual material was layered over it, blood and bone and stranger things. Ash that had been human. Crystals that had grown in places they shouldn't. Cloth marked with symbols in handwriting that belonged to seven different people.

Ace raised her blade and brought it down against the stone with all the force in her body.

The stone did not crack. The stone was old and hard and had endured for centuries before the cult found it. But the sigil shattered like glass.

The effect was immediate and catastrophic. The Fragment's connection to this side of reality snapped. It shrieked—a sound that was the reverse of sound, that created a pressure wave outward that threw

every conscious thing in the clearing to the ground. The three cultists who were still upright flew backwards into the trees. Ace felt her ribs compress, felt breath forced from her lungs, but she was already moving.

The void was collapsing inward, folding in on itself. It was like watching something die that had never been alive. The air was trying to un-tear, and the process was violent and nauseating to witness. Ace could see the Fragment's form becoming less coherent, could see it trying desperately to maintain purchase on this reality, trying to stay born.

It would not succeed.

She drove both katanas into the central point of the collapsing void, not to kill it—it wasn't alive in a way that killing meant anything—but to sever its last connections. The blades passed through absence and came out the other side covered in something that was not blood. It was substance that wanted to exist but didn't have the right shape. It burned against her hands like ice.

The tearing sound reversed. The void inverted, folding further and further inward, becoming smaller. The pressure on her chest released. Her vision stabilized. The geometry of the clearing reasserted itself into something approaching normal, though the stones still glowed with faint wrongness, and the grass at the center of the site would never grow green again.

The Fragment was gone. Not dead. Not sealed. Just... returned. Sent back into the spaces between things, into the state of potential it should never have left.

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#### **Part Four: The Silence After**

Ace was breathing hard, her hands shaking—whether from exertion or from having touched something that fundamental to wrongness, she didn't know. The emerald glow of her katanas had dimmed to almost nothing. She cleaned the blades on her pants, watching the strange substance evaporate into nothing as it left the metal.

Four cultists lay still in the clearing. The others had run into the forest. She could hear the sound of them crashing through underbrush, moving away with the panic of people who had seen the face of something that unmade sense itself.

She would not chase them.

The hunt was over. They had come here to birth a god, or a fragment of one, and they had failed. Some of them had paid the price for that failure. Others had escaped into the night forest, believing now with a certainty that transcendence was not a gift but a trap, that the fragment they had loved was a demon that had almost consumed them.

Let them carry that knowledge into whatever remained of their lives.

Ace looked at the ruined clearing one more time. The central stone was still standing, but the sigil was gone completely, shattered into dust that would never reassemble. The ritual materials were scattered, rendered inert. The phosphorescent grass was already beginning to fade, as if the wrongness that had nurtured it was departing with the Fragment.

She turned toward the forest and began to move back through the deep woods. Behind her, the stones gradually stopped glowing. The forest began to remember what birds sounded like. In a week,

small animals would return to the clearing. In a month, grass would begin to grow in normal green again.

But for tonight, the site remained a dead place. A scar in the world.

Ace moved between the massive old-growth trees, back toward the point where she had entered. Her breathing had steadied. The shaking in her hands had stopped. By the time she reached the forest's edge and found the road where her vehicle was waiting, she had already begun to forget the specific details of the thing she had fought.

Not because her mind rejected them, but because some experiences were too far outside the normal human range to retain. They slipped away like dreams. She would remember the facts: the clearing, the cult, the Fragment that wanted birth. She would remember that she had stopped it. But the feeling of it, the specific wrongness—that would fade.

It was better that way.

She drove through the night toward the next location where the traces had led her. There was always another clearing. Always another cult. Always another demon that wanted to be born into the world, and Ace to stand between them and their transcendence.

She did not think about what the Fragment would do now, back in the spaces between things. She did not consider whether she had killed it or merely inconvenienced it. These were not productive thoughts. These were the thoughts that led people to hesitation, and hesitation led to death.

Instead, she drove in silence through the pre-dawn darkness, and behind her, the forest sealed itself off from the sky, the last remaining wrongness fading like a dream upon waking.

The Neverborn Fragment was not dead. It was not sealed. It was simply, for now, not here.

And that was enough.

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Last update: **20/03/2026 11:33**

