

Episode 22 — The Laughter Underground



The town was built on coal, and the coal was exhausted.

Riverside, Pennsylvania had a population of four hundred and thirty-seven. It had a main street with a pub that was full on Fridays and empty on Mondays. It had a hardware store run by a man whose father had run it before him, and whose father before that had sold mining equipment. The school building was newer than it should have been, rebuilt after the mine collapsed a section of it in 1989. The hospital was eight miles away. The people who still lived here did so because they were born here, or because they had nowhere else to go.

The coal mine had employed six hundred people at its peak. It had closed fifteen years ago. The main shaft was sealed with a concrete cap that sat over it like a tombstone. Two secondary shafts remained on the property's northeast edge, fenced and supposedly monitored, though the fencing had rusted and the monitoring was mostly theoretical.

It was from one of those secondary shafts that the laughter came.

Jerry Paulson was a maintenance worker for the property management company that technically owned the sealed mine. He went out every three weeks to check the fencing, walk the perimeter, make sure nothing had been vandalized or stolen. On an afternoon in late August, as he was checking

one of the secondary shaft caps, he heard it: a sound coming up from below that was not singular.

It was laughter. Multiple voices, overlapping, building on each other, echoing up through the concrete and the fencing and the rust. It was the sound of an enormous crowd finding something hilarious, except the crowd was underground and dead.

Jerry filed a report. He didn't get a response. He told people at the Riverside Pub on Friday night, which was how news moved through a town like this. A teenager named Marcus had snuck into that same shaft three months earlier on a dare and heard the same sound. A retired miner named Robert Chen, who still drove out to the sealed mine monthly to check on the main shaft cap—a ritual from his working days that he'd never abandoned—had heard it twice now, and it was getting louder.

Three men, three separate occasions, one impossible sound.

Within a week, Jerry Paulson stopped speaking.

Not stopped talking—stopped making sound. His mouth moved. He tried. But nothing came out. He went to the hospital. The doctors examined his vocal cords. They were fine. His larynx was fine. Everything was anatomically correct. But he produced no sound whatsoever.

The silence was absolute.

Marcus, the teenager, lasted four more days before he went mute. Robert Chen lasted five. A woman named Helen Prescott, who had driven out to listen to the laughter herself because she didn't believe in ghosts but was curious anyway, went mute the next day.

Four people. All silent. All unable to produce any sound from their throats at all. It wasn't paralysis. It wasn't pain. It was the systematic removal of their capacity to make voice.

The town got quiet. Literally. The people with the ability to speak did so more carefully. The pub's volume dropped. The school's hallways changed timbre. An absence has weight, and the weight of four lost voices was enough to change the air in a place this small.

That was when Ace arrived.

She drove in at night, parked the truck outside the town limits, and walked. She was carrying nothing but the katanas, and her violet eyes moved across the town's geography taking everything in. She didn't go to the police. She didn't introduce herself to anyone official.

She went directly to the mine.

She could hear the laughter from outside the secondary shaft fence. Even from a distance, it was wrong—not one voice, not two, but a layering of sounds that built on each other in a way that suggested too many things speaking at once. And underneath it, if you listened carefully, you could hear the absence. The sound was made from stolen voice. You could feel it.

She cut the fence and went down.

The secondary shaft descended at an angle rather than straight down, which made the descent manageable but impossible to predict. The darkness was absolute. She moved through it with the ease of someone who had spent enough time in dark places to stop being afraid of them.

As she descended, the laughter got louder.

The mine's acoustics were extraordinary. Every sound she made—each footfall, each breath—came back to her larger than it should have been. Multiplied. The laughter echoed and re-echoed until it seemed like the mine itself was laughing, until the entire underground was composed of that one impossible sound.

She reached the main chamber where the secondary shaft opened into the larger working area. The laughter was deafening now. It came from deeper—from the place where the mine went down into itself, where the working darkness was most complete.

Ace moved deeper.

She found it in the deepest accessible chamber, and what she found was not a shape so much as a presence. The Sound Leech did not have a discrete form—it was constructed entirely of the acoustic matter it had consumed over years in the mine. It was visible as a kind of dense shimmer, a distortion in the air like heat rippling off asphalt, but heavy with presence. You could feel it in your chest.

The laughter it was made of came from every person who had ever worked this mine. Layer upon layer of voices, sounds, vibrations absorbed into the entity's substance. Every laugh, every shout, every curse, every moment of human sound that had ever echoed in this place was now part of the demon's composition.

When it detected Ace, it got louder.

Not as an attack. Just as acknowledgment. Response.

She drew her katanas.

The fight was the loudest thing that had ever happened. The Sound Leech attacked with waves of accumulated noise—a physical force constructed from decades of human vocalization. It was trying to take her voice, trying to extract it the way it had extracted the voices of Jerry and Marcus and Robert and Helen. But she fought in the mine's deafening chaos, and her blades cut through sound-matter as though it was solid.

She was nearly deaf by the time she began fighting in earnest. The sound had overwhelmed her auditory system. She fought in the roar, navigating by sight and instinct and the feel of her blades making contact. She was looking for the core—the oldest sound, the first vocalization that had ever been absorbed into the entity.

The Sound Leech didn't want to let it go. The core was its genesis, its foundation. But it couldn't protect everything at once. Ace cut through layers of accumulated audio—the laughter of a hundred miners, the warning shouts, the songs sung in the darkness, the intimate conversations that echoed off stone. She cut through all of it, searching for the first sound.

She found it at the mine's deepest point.

It was a frequency more than a sound—something she could feel in her teeth, a bell-tone struck in rock on the first day the mine ever opened. It was the sound of the first pickaxe hitting the coal face. The beginning of extraction. The start of all the sound that would follow.

Ace drove both of her katanas through it.

The entity collapsed inward. All of the accumulated sound, all of the stolen voices, all of the laughter compressed back into that single original tone. For a moment the note was so pure and bright and

terrible that it seemed to fill the entire mine.

Then silence.

Absolute silence. The kind of silence that only happens when every sound ever made in a place is suddenly gone. The mine became the quietest space that had ever existed. There was no echo. There was no ambient sound. There was nothing but the absence of everything.

Ace stood in that silence, breathing carefully, her blades still extended.

After a long time, she cleaned her katanas and walked back up toward the light.

The muted victims began to regain their voices over the next three days.

Jerry Paulson woke up on the morning of the fourth day and made a sound—small, tentative, his own voice returning like a prodigal. He wept. He called his wife. He said her name over and over, just to hear himself say it.

Marcus found his voice and immediately wanted to tell everyone what had happened, but there was nothing to tell. The laughter was gone. The thing beneath the mine was gone. The silence it left was already fading back into normal ambient sound.

Robert Chen spoke to the mine cap one last time, thanking it for its service, and never came back.

Helen Prescott said nothing about it. She had gone into the mine for curiosity and had come out without answers. She didn't go back.

Ace was already in the next county by the time the last voices returned. She drove through the night with the windows down, her hearing slowly returning to normal. The ringing in her ears faded by dawn. By the time the sun was fully up, the world sounded like it should again.

Behind her, Riverside went back to being a quiet town. The silence that had been imposed by loss was gone. The town could be quiet by choice again, at its own pace, in its own way.

The coal mine still stood. The cap still held. But four people could speak again, which was something.

It was enough.

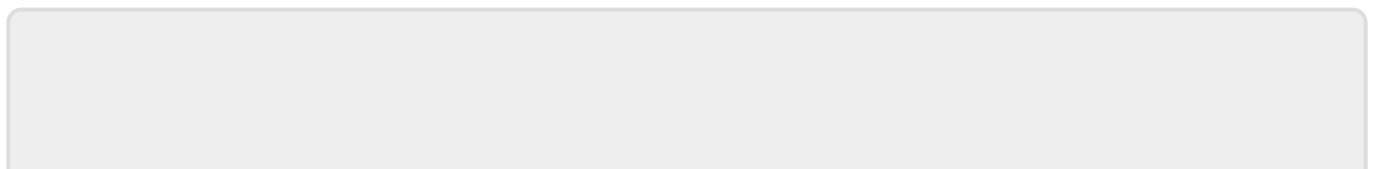
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