

Episode 24 — The Unmade Road



Part One: The Lost

The Torrance couple had been driving for eighteen kilometers on a road that should have taken twenty minutes. They had been driving for eight months.

When the county found the car—a 2008 Honda Civic, blue, with Nevada plates—it was parked two hundred meters from the junction where they'd entered, the engine cold, the fuel tank dry as bone. The odometer read 14,000 kilometers more than it had when they started. Their smartphones had died long ago. Their water bottles were empty. Their bodies were intact, mostly, just diminished by the specific attrition of time spent sitting, breathing, slowly becoming thinner until the physical fact of them barely registered anymore.

The official reports never made sense. Dehydration. Starvation. Psychological break. Something about the landscape playing tricks, the straight road somehow bending their minds. The county had called it a tragic accident of disorientation. Then it happened again.

And again.

By the time Ace heard about it—first from a truck driver in a diner in Nevada, then months later from

a woman at a gas station in Oregon who'd lost a cousin to the same stretch—the road had already taken five vehicles. Every single one found within the boundaries of that eighteen-kilometer stretch between the northern and southern junctions. Every single one with fuel in the tank when they entered, empty when they were found. Every victim showing the same dead-eyed exhaustion, the thousand-yard stare of someone who had been traveling to nowhere.

Ace had spent the last two weeks driving toward it.

The landscape was farm country—flat, irrigated, the sky enormous and pale. A water tower visible to the west. The road itself was unmarked blacktop, well-maintained, utterly ordinary. She pulled her vehicle to the shoulder a half-kilometer before the northern junction and killed the engine.

The silence was immediate.

She got out and began walking.

Part Two: The Node

On foot, the wrongness was subtle enough that she might have missed it if she wasn't looking. The landscape stayed still. The road didn't loop. The landmarks didn't repeat. But there was something underneath the ordinary—a pressure in the air, a slight discord between the sound of her boots on the blacktop and the way it *felt* beneath her feet. The space was slightly wrong. Not broken. Just... uncalibrated.

She walked the full eighteen kilometers without stopping. Her violet eyes tracked details automatically: the pattern of the fence posts (irregular—local repair), the tire marks on the shoulder (overlaid, confused, many of them driving in loops), the way the water tower seemed to shift relative positions even though she was traveling in a straight line.

At kilometer nine, the wrongness became specific.

There was a patch of road about two meters square where the asphalt was fractionally colder than the surrounding surface. Not cracked. Not discolored. Just *there*, a concentration of wrongness the way a knot in wood is a concentration of grain. She crouched beside it and put her palm flat against the surface.

The road vibrated.

Not from traffic. No vehicles had passed in either direction. The vibration came from below—a low frequency that she could feel in her back teeth, in her bones, in the metal of the katanas on her back. The frequency of something vast distributed through the earth and asphalt, a consciousness that existed in the geometry of this stretch, in the spatial relationships between the fields and the sky and the destinations that never quite arrived.

She marked the location mentally and kept walking.

By the time she reached the southern junction, the pressure had lifted. The road was just a road again. The fields were just fields. The water tower was a fixed point in space rather than something that turned subtly with her passing.

She sat on the guardrail for a moment, bleeding air in and out, processing what she'd felt.

Then she walked back to her vehicle.

Part Three: The Trap

The entity couldn't trap pedestrians the way it trapped drivers. The loop required the logic of navigation—the mind expecting to arrive somewhere, the framework of journey, the mathematics of time spent in motion. On foot, she'd existed outside the trap's jurisdiction. She was exempt.

Driving in, she wasn't.

She sat in the driver's seat with the door open and the keys in her hand for a long moment. The cost-benefit equation was straightforward: enter the stretch, cross to the node, drive the blades through its core, accept the probability of being caught if something went wrong. The alternative was leaving the road as it was—a living trap, a consciousness that fed on the expectation of arrival, that kept people circulating through space without ever reaching destination.

She started the engine.

The moment the vehicle crossed the northern junction, she felt it: a subtle shift in the spatial logic, a small click in the machinery of the road's functioning. The loop was beginning. The entity's consciousness, distributed through the asphalt and the earth beneath, was turning inward. It recognized vehicle-logic. It was activating.

She drove carefully down the center line, watching her odometer. The landmarks were wrong already—the water tower had shifted position relative to the road. She could feel the spatial relationships beginning to fray. She had minutes before the loop sealed completely.

At kilometer nine, she stopped the vehicle and got out.

The patch of road was easier to see when she was looking for it. The surface vibrated under her boots. She drew both katanas—the blades flared into their full glow, an emerald brightness that seemed to drink the sunlight from the sky.

She lined them up with the patch's center and drove down.

The resistance was enormous.

The road bucked like something alive. The asphalt cracked. The earth beneath shuddered. She pushed with all the force she had, using the vehicle's inertia and her own strength combined, driving the blades deeper. They sank through the asphalt, through soil, through something that felt like compressed thought, like consciousness made dense.

The entity reacted.

The spatial wrongness spiked catastrophically. The road around her began to fold in on itself. She could see the landscape distorting, the straight line of the highway beginning to curve in ways that physics didn't allow. The water tower appeared in two places at once. The sky seemed to double.

She held the blades in.

The entity's consciousness, vast and distributed through the entire eighteen-kilometer stretch, contracted toward the node—contracting like a hand closing, pulling every thread of its awareness toward the point of the blades. The concentration happened in a moment, all that decentralized intelligence suddenly funneling toward a single point.

Then it detonated.

The wave of spatial dislocation traveled outward from the node in both directions simultaneously, a pressure change that she felt as much as saw. The road screamed—not audibly, but in dimensions of reality that sound didn't traverse. The entity's consciousness, compressed to a point, simply ceased to be.

The world went still.

Ace withdrew the blades. The road was just asphalt now. The landscape was just landscape. The water tower was fixed in a single position in space. The air was breathable again.

She got back in the vehicle and drove to the southern junction.

Part Four: Ordinary

The road behind her was ordinary.

She passed the northern junction in her mirror and kept driving. The landscape returned to simple agricultural flatness. The sky was just sky. In a few hours she'd be in another town, another diner, another conversation with people who didn't know what lived in the places they drove through.

The county would repave this stretch sometime in the spring. The section where the node had been would get particular attention—a few centimeters of new asphalt, making it unmarked and unremarkable. Life would move forward. Drivers would arrive at their destinations on schedule.

The five families who had lost people to the loop would never have adequate explanation. They would never have anyone to hold accountable. They would never have the simple mercy of truth. The official reports would stand: disorientation, accident, tragedy. The road would be clean again.

There were worse compromises. Ace had learned to accept them.

The vehicle carried her south through the flat country, engine steady, the road underneath absolutely normal, predictable in its ordinariness. She didn't look back.

Behind her, the agricultural landscape rolled on—fields and sky and the distant geometry of the water tower. Nothing moved. Nothing was wrong. The road was just a road, and it would remain one, forever, unless something else decided to live in it.

For now, that was enough.

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