

Episode 30 — The Congregation Below

The jackhammer bit into concrete that shouldn't exist.

Marcus had been doing foundation work for thirty-two years, and he knew the sound of every type of substrate a building in this region could sit on. Bedrock, clay, gravel, sand, the occasional stretch of old slab. This was none of those. This was cast concrete—deliberate, engineered, old. The kind that had been poured to last.

He killed the jackhammer and stared at the crack he'd opened. The dust settled. Behind his safety glasses, his eyes adjusted to the gap. About two feet across, jagged at the edges. He crouched and aimed his headlamp through.

What it showed him made his breath catch.

A room. Large, underground, perfectly preserved. Dust lay in even sheets across the floor, undisturbed. The walls were visible only as shadows, but they were there—supporting a ceiling that had to be at least forty feet down. And in the center of that room, marked clearly on the floor despite the dust of twenty years, was a pattern.

Not painted. Not traced. Embedded. The geometric arrangement of some material he couldn't identify—darker than the concrete, catching his light in a way that made his eyes want to slip away from it. A circle within a circle within a circle. Angles within angles. Mathematical. Deliberate.

Something moved in the pattern's center.

Marcus jerked back from the gap. A shift. A wrongness. The air there had bent for a moment—just a moment—and something had occupied it that wasn't **there** until it was. He was a rational man. He had never believed in things that happened without cause. But he believed his eyes, and his eyes said something was in that pattern that shouldn't be anywhere.

He scrambled for his plywood scraps and his nail gun. Twenty minutes later, the gap was sealed. His hands were steady, but his jaw was tight. He called his supervisor. His supervisor called the building inspector.

The building inspector came by himself, which was strange. Most inspectors brought their paperwork, their clipboards, their administrative thickness. This one just looked at the sealed gap for thirty seconds and said, "Pull back your equipment. This site is on hold."

"For how long?" Marcus asked.

"I don't know yet," the inspector said. He was a man named Reeves, maybe fifty, with the kind of face that belonged to someone carrying a weight nobody could see. "I'll be in touch."

Marcus never went back to that site. The hold remained in place for four months. When work resumed, a concrete contractor had already sealed the gap from below with a foundation pour that looked, to Marcus's eye, like it was prepared to last another thousand years.

He never asked what they'd found down there. He didn't want to know.

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Ace received the contact through three layers of intermediaries—a chain of people who knew people

who owed favors to people who remembered that she existed. The message came in the form of a name and an address: the building inspector, a number, a town in the valley region, the phrase “immediately if possible.”

She didn't ask questions. Questions in her line of work were how people ended up asking more of them while their bodies were being unmade.

The drive took six hours. The town was called Hardwick, population 847, founded in 1987 on what had been agricultural land east of a state highway. The kind of town that wasn't really built so much as accumulated—a grocery store near a post office near a bank near a hardware store, spreading outward in concentric circles from wherever the first permanent buildings had gone up. It had the look of genuine stability. People who had lived here would have lived their entire lives here. Their children would live here. It was the kind of place that didn't expect change.

The building inspector was in his office, third floor of the county building, a space that smelled like coffee and filing cabinets and the particular staleness of recirculated air. His name was Reeves. He'd been waiting for her.

“Twenty-three years,” he said, without preamble. “I've had your contact information for twenty-three years. A woman came through when I was an inspector in Portland, gave it to me, said only use it if you have to. I've had to.”

“Show me,” Ace said.

He drove her to the site. The excavation had been resumed two months ago, he explained—the hold had finally expired, the building had been approved, but they'd been authorized to work only around the sealed section. It remained a concrete void in the middle of what should have been the building's foundation. Above it, the new structure had been engineered to avoid putting weight there, to distribute the load around it, to pretend it didn't exist.

The contractor had left the access point. A removable plywood section in the floor of the excavated area. Reeves helped her move it. Below, steps led down into darkness.

“I won't go,” Reeves said. “I've kept myself from thinking about that room for two decades. I plan to keep doing that.”

“That won't work,” Ace said, but she wasn't talking to him anymore.

She had entered the space where her attention lived, the narrow place where her mind did its best work.

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The descent was easy. The steps had been cut into the earth with precision, probably in the early 1970s, probably by people who had believed themselves to be doing something important. The air grew cooler as she dropped deeper. At the bottom, the corridor opened into the room.

Dust. The smell of sealed air, mineral and still. The walls had been covered in documentation—papers, photographs, printouts, handwritten journals all pinned or taped to the concrete. A record kept by people who had believed their work mattered enough to deserve recording. Ace didn't read any of it. The documents were secondary. The pattern was everything.

It was larger than Marcus's description suggested. The circle within circles took up nearly half the

floor of the room, maybe thirty feet in diameter. The geometry was precise—sharp angles, exact proportions, the kind of thing that would have taken weeks to mark and embed. The material was black stone or something that resembled it, seamlessly worked into the floor concrete. And in the center—

The wrongness she could feel it without looking directly at it. The air there was occupied. Something was in the process of arriving, had been in the process for twenty years, and had accumulated enough substance that she could sense it even in its not-quite-state. The silhouette was vague, shifting, never the same for more than a moment.

The entity had been almost-born for two decades. Nearly-arriving. Sustained on ambient energy—the proximity of the town, eight hundred living beings above it generating the kind of sustained biological presence that things beyond the veil found nourishing. But it had accelerated. It had accumulated enough. It was finally ready to complete the arrival.

Not today.

Ace moved toward the ritual arrangement with the precision of someone who had destroyed these things before. Not killing, exactly. Prevention. The entity wasn't alive in any meaningful sense—it hadn't completed the process that would have allowed it to live. It was a half-summoned thing, an abandoned engine, and she was going to abort the cycle before the engine could turn over.

The first marker she found was a central stone—obsidian black, marked with symbols that belonged to no written language, set into the concrete with resin that had remained intact for twenty years. She placed her emerald blade against it and drove downward. The stone cracked. The wrongness in the center of the pattern *shuddered*.

The entity responded.

It didn't move—movement implied a position to move from—but something in the room changed violently. The air got thinner. The dust on the floor spiraled inward toward the center. The half-summoned thing understood it was being interrupted and began pulling itself together with desperate force, abandoning the slow accumulation of twenty years for a chaotic rush toward full manifestation.

What emerged was unstable.

A limb appeared—something that resembled an arm, covered in what might have been flesh or might have been something that had never been flesh—and then the arm was gone and something with too many joints was extending across the room. A face formed in the chaos, features almost human but distorted, stretched, screaming without sound. The mass expanded, contracted, filled half the chamber with shifting form that didn't have enough cohesion to maintain any shape longer than seconds.

Ace moved through it like water through cloth. She did not waste time fighting the impossible. She moved from marker to marker around the circle, driving her blades through the embedded stones, shattering the pattern one point at a time. The entity lashed out at her—a strike from something that wasn't quite solid, that didn't quite exist—and caught her across the shoulder. Pain bloomed. Her left arm went numb for a moment. She kept moving.

The second marker. The blade went in. Crack, shatter, gone.

The entity formed something like a mouth and tried to articulate something—a word, a question, a plea—but the sound came out twisted and backwards. It struck at her again, and this time the blow

caught her square across the ribs. She felt bone flex. Felt the air go out of her lungs. Kept moving.

Third marker. Fourth. The entity was falling apart faster now, its form fragmenting as the circle's structure broke down. It was like fighting something that was unmade as much as it was fighting—the boundary between the two of them becoming less distinct. She tasted something that might have been blood or might have been something else. Her vision flickered.

The final marker was at what would have been south in the pattern's geometry. It was smaller than the others—a keystone, the point that bound all the others. She reached it. The entity made one last push toward cohesion, trying to achieve a complete form before she could shatter the last anchor point. For just a moment, it succeeded. She saw it. Something vast and terrible and almost-real, something that had nearly arrived, something that would have destroyed everything in Hardwick if it had completed the cycle.

She drove both blades through the final marker.

The stone shattered. The pattern broke. The geometry that had sustained the arrival cycle for twenty years collapsed in on itself. And the entity—the half-summoned thing, the abandoned engine, the thing that had been on the verge of becoming real—made a sound like a question. Like a syllable asking why. Like something that had been trying so hard to exist wondering why it didn't.

And then it was gone.

Not dead. Entities like this couldn't die because they had never lived. It was unborn. Returned to the state of potential. Released from the binding that had held it in this almost-state for two decades.

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Ace climbed out of the compound into the evening air.

The town was lit above her, warm and golden, full of people eating dinner, watching television, lying in bed with their spouses, going through the routines of their lives. None of them knew what was beneath them. None of them had any sense that they had just been spared from an arrival that would have reshaped their entire world. They simply existed, unaware, untouched.

She walked back to where Reeves was waiting, his car parked near the sealed excavation site.

"It's done," she said. "Fill it in."

He nodded. She could see it in his face—he had already known that's what she would say. He had already made the arrangements. Concrete would flow tomorrow. Another thousand years of seal.

"Thank you," he said.

Ace didn't respond to gratitude. She walked to her vehicle, started the engine, and drove out of Hardwick as the night deepened. In her rearview mirror, the town receded, warm and golden and ignorant of how close it had come to unmaking.

Behind her, somewhere deep in the earth, the space where an entity had been trying to arrive for twenty years was now empty. The ritual was broken. The cycle was interrupted.

Nothing that had been almost-summoned would ever complete its arrival through that particular pattern again.

And in his office, Reeves began the paperwork that would authorize the final sealing. His hands were steady. He had been waiting to do this for twenty-three years.—

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