

Episode 31 — Weight of the Valley

The entry to the valley should have been beautiful.

In spring, in other years, in any season where something wasn't occupying the geological depression like a stone pressing down on a sleeping animal, the switchback road would have rewarded the driver with views that justified every scenic postcard ever printed from this region. Peaks across the eastern face, the river visible from certain angles, the kind of landscape that made people want to relocate and open coffee shops.

Ace felt the weight the moment her vehicle crossed the threshold.

It wasn't dramatic. No sudden pressure. Just a gradual increase as she descended the first switchback—her engine laboring slightly more than it should have, the air feeling heavier in her lungs, her body settling into the vehicle seat with the sensation of increased gravity. She was light by design, by physiology, and she noticed everything about her own weight. The change was unmistakable.

She drove the remaining switchbacks in silence and parked near the town center.

Three hundred residents, the preliminary information had suggested. She counted fewer visible people on the main street as she stepped out. Those she could see moved with the exhausted deliberation of animals climbing a mountain. A woman pushed a shopping cart that looked heavier than the groceries inside it could possibly be. A man sat on a bench with the posture of someone who had achieved rest and was terrified of losing it.

The sky was clear. The weather was fair. But the valley felt like the inside of a bell that someone was pressing down on from above.

Ace didn't go into the grocery store or the post office. She didn't interview the residents or visit the small clinic or drive past the school. She had been in places like this before—not at this severity, but the signature was always the same. Something was sitting on the world and adding its weight. She could feel its location the way blind people could feel a wall before touching it. There was a geographic low point. That was where the entity would be.

She left the town following the river northeast.

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The valley floor was difficult to traverse. The grass leaned wrong, bent under an invisible pressure that had nothing to do with wind. The cattle in the pastures were mostly immobile, standing in clusters or lying in the fields where they had apparently given up trying to move. Several were dead—she passed their bodies, already beginning to decompose, their forms slumped at angles that suggested they had simply stopped breathing under the strain of exertion against increased gravity.

The river moved like diseased blood through the valley. Its current was sluggish, its voice muted. It had been here for ten thousand years, and Ace wondered if the river itself could feel the wrongness of the water it carried moving slower than water should move.

The geological low point would be where the river went deepest—where the valley floor descended to its actual bottom. She followed the water, watching the terrain grow steadily more constrained, the walls of the valley growing closer and higher. The sky above was a narrowing strip of blue.

The cave entrance was exactly what she expected: a crack in the valley floor near the river, wide enough for a person to descend if they were willing to trust their weight to stone. She was willing. She dropped through.

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The first chamber was large, cathedral-like, the kind of underground space that made people understand why their ancestors had considered caves to be places of profound significance. Stalactites hung from the ceiling, and even in the weight of this place, water continued to drip from them with patient irregularity. The sound was quieter than it should have been, as if the gravity was dampening even sound waves.

Ace moved deeper.

The gravity intensified. It wasn't a sudden change at any point—instead, it was a gradient, a steadily increasing resistance to motion. Each drop down to a lower chamber took more effort than the last. Her body was accustomed to moving with precision and speed, but here, speed was impossible. She moved at a controlled descent, testing her weight against the stone, aware that if she fell from any height in this place, the fall wouldn't kill her quickly.

By the time she reached the largest chamber, she was moving at half her normal speed. Her heart rate had climbed. Her muscles had begun to ache in the specific way that came from moving against significantly increased resistance. The air was colder here, and her breath showed as mist. The stone beneath her feet was ancient and worn smooth by water that had flowed through here for millennia, patient and indifferent.

The chamber opened before her like a cathedral vault. Fifty feet high, maybe, perhaps wider. And suspended in its center, at approximately chest height if she were standing directly beneath it, was the entity.

It did not look like a monster.

It looked like a very heavy nothing. A sphere, roughly the size of a human head, of a darkness so complete that it seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. There was no visible means of suspension. It simply hung there, occupying space, existing. And the presence of it—the sheer density of its existence—created a singularity of gravity in this chamber. Everything heavier here. Everything slower.

Ace could feel her bones working harder. Her heart rate accelerated. The weight was significant enough that she was genuinely aware of her own cardiovascular system for the first time in years, working against pressure that no human body was designed to withstand for extended periods.

She closed the distance methodically.

Not fast. Not deliberately, exactly. Simply with the acceptance of someone who understood that stopping was dying. The entity did not move. It did not react to her approach. It simply was, and by being, it crushed everything around it under the weight of its existence. She had maybe five minutes before the strain on her cardiovascular system became critical. Maybe ten if she was fortunate. She couldn't afford to slow down, and she couldn't afford to rush.

One foot in front of the other. The gravity increased with each step. Each movement required more effort than the last. She was breathing hard now, her body screaming that this was wrong, that nothing should be moving in an environment this dense.

She reached the entity.

Her blades were heavy in her hands—heavier than they should have been, even accounting for the increased gravity. She raised them. Drove them both into the suspended sphere.

The resistance was extraordinary.

It was like cutting into something with the weight of a planet behind it. The blades went in, but just barely. A millimeter. Two. She held them there and pushed, every muscle in her body straining, her vision beginning to darken at the edges from the effort. The entity gave, slowly, unwillingly, not fighting in any directional sense but simply being heavy, being density, being the thing that pulled everything down.

Her blades pushed deeper.

This was not a fight in any conventional sense. There were no strikes to parry, no motion to anticipate. There was simply the entity's absolute refusal to be penetrated, its weight meeting her force, the two in opposition until one gave way. Her arms trembled. Her legs felt weak. Her heart was pounding now, a frantic rhythm against the crushing pressure of the gravity.

Deeper still.

And then something changed. A structural collapse. The sphere's interior coherence shattered. It was as if whatever binding held its density in place had broken, and the weight redistributed itself differently. Her blades went through like breaking through ice.

The entity came apart.

Not explosively. It simply ceased. The presence that had been occupying the cave's largest chamber stopped existing. The gravity dropped instantly—not gradually, but like a switch had been thrown. The pressure that had been bearing down on everything in this valley for months suddenly lifted.

Ace felt it even here, deep underground. The air changed. Her breathing became easier. Her heart began to slow.

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She climbed out of the cave system slowly, aware that she had pushed her body to its limits and that recovery would take time. Above ground, the change was unmistakable.

The valley had voice again.

She could hear the river—its real voice, fast and vital and alive. She could hear a dog barking somewhere in the direction of the town, with the energy and joy of an animal that had suddenly been relieved of a burden. The grass stood straighter, or at least appeared to. The light seemed brighter, less filtered through weight.

Ace stood on the valley floor and breathed the lighter air.

She didn't enter the town. She didn't check on residents or visit the clinic or confirm that children were being put down and were walking on their own power again. That was their business. Her business was finished.

She climbed the switchback road slowly, feeling the weight receding with every meter of elevation

she gained. By the time she reached the valley's threshold and turned back to look at what she was leaving, the feeling of pressure was entirely gone. The valley was simply a valley again—beautiful, geological, indifferent to the things that had occupied its lowest point.

She drove east without looking back, and the valley receded behind her until it was nothing but a geography on a map.

Underground, in the cave system, what remained of the entity settled into its final state—no longer existing in any way that mattered, no longer pressing down on anything, finally still. The stone around it dripped water with patient regularity. The river continued its ancient work of carving through rock. And the valley, relieved of its burden, began the slow work of remembering what it felt like to be light.—

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