

## # Episode 33 — The Architect's Dream

The project manager's eyes opened at three in the morning, and blood ran from his nose down the back of his throat.

He lay still in the dark of his bedroom, heart galloping, the dream already dissolving but the certainty of it remaining like scar tissue. He'd been standing on the construction site, but the site wasn't there anymore. No cranes. No fencing. No steel frames waiting for glass and drywall. Just him and the bare earth and the sky, and beneath his feet the ancient landscape, unchanged for centuries. The hill was lower. The land around it moved in shapes he couldn't name.

And underneath everything—below the earth, below the stone he stood on—something vast was looking back at him.

He got out of bed carefully, as if movement might wake it. His hands shook when he turned on the bathroom light. The nosebleed was lighter than the night before, but it had come again. The twelfth time in as many nights.

He hadn't slept in forty hours. He was running on coffee and muscle memory, showing up to the site, walking through the day, saying the right words to the contractors. And every time his eyes closed, he was back there, standing on the wrong earth, feeling that thing's attention settle on him like weight.

The crack in the foundation slab had appeared three days ago.

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Ace read about the anomaly in a regional planning notice—a footnote, really, mentioned in a heritage preservation committee report about a construction project at the edge of Vermont. \*Ancient foundation layer, pattern carving, geological survey discrepancy.\*

She knew that kind of discrepancy. She'd seen it before. The patterns they carved, the way they sank themselves into earth and stone—it was consistent. Deliberate. Old.

She drove through the night and arrived at the site as the sun was rising pale and cold over the new construction. The chain-link fencing was standard, the site office a temporary trailer, the heavy equipment inert and gold in the dawn light. She parked at the perimeter and walked the fence line until she found a gap that had been there long enough to collect rust. She ducked through.

The community center was a skeleton—concrete foundation slab, steel frame climbing toward two stories, some of the exterior walls framed out but mostly sky where walls should be. The crack was easy to find. It ran like a deliberate scar across the poured concrete, not the jagged stress fracture of settling or load, but a smooth, curving path that matched a pattern. Someone had left the photographs of the anomaly layer in the site office. She found them, compared the carvings, saw the match.

The project manager was in the office, hunched over a coffee that had gone cold. His eyes had the dead quality of someone running on amphetamine will.

"Excavation's sealed," he said without her asking. His voice was hoarse. "Heritage office was supposed to send someone. They didn't."

Ace said nothing. She laid the anomaly photographs next to the crack documentation, watched him see the match.

"It's getting worse," he said. His hands moved like they belonged to someone else. "The dreams. I can't—" He stopped. Looked at her like she'd asked a question. Maybe she had. Maybe her just being there was enough. "I'm standing there. The site. But it's not the site. The hill is different. Everything under the ground is close. Too close. And something underneath is waking up. It's been asleep, and I woke it, and now it's coming."

His voice cracked on the last word.

"How deep did they dig?" Ace asked.

"Fifteen meters before they hit the old layer. Foundation stone. Bedrock beneath that."

She took the anomaly photos and left him there.

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The site was quieter at night. The excavation access had been filled in and covered, but not sealed—construction laziness, the intention to clear it again in the morning. Ace worked alone under the moon, moving fill with a shovel she found in the tool shed. It took her four hours to reopen the access shaft. Her hands were steady. Her breathing never changed.

When the hole was deep enough, she climbed down.

The ancient stone was wider than the photographs showed. It extended in both directions beyond where the original excavation had probed. The surface was carved—geometric patterns that twisted and reformed if she looked at them too long, creating the impression of movement where there was only still rock.

She ran her hands across the stone, learning it the way she learned the angle of a guard's approach or the weight of a draw-stroke. And then she found the face.

It was on the underside of the stone, or rather, pressed up from below it—an impression so deep it was almost three-dimensional. A wide face, featureless in the way of very old things, with a sense of enormous eyes staring upward through rock and earth and foundation and time. It had been here for centuries. It had been waiting.

Her hands told her what her eyes couldn't confirm in the darkness: the face was warm.

She stood on the ancient stone, feet planted on the impression of a forehead that belonged to nothing alive, and she understood. The Stone Dreamer wasn't beneath the stone. It *was* the stone, or part of it, or pressed against its underside from something deeper. It had slept for uncounted years, dormant, patient. Then the excavation broke through. Then the project manager's crew had hit its face.

Now it was waking.

Ace drew her blades. The emerald glow started low and built, filling the excavation shaft with light the color of deep water.

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The first sign of waking was pressure. The ancient stone vibrated beneath her feet—not a quake, but something slower, something with intent. The ground around her shifted. Fill began to settle from above, dust falling like snow in the green light of her blades. The face-impression flexed, and cracks

spider-webbed across the stone's surface.

She drove the first blade into the center of the forehead.

The response was immediate. The walls of the excavation shaft compressed. Concrete poured for the foundation pressed down. The stone beneath her moved in waves, traveling from the center of her strike outward, and she felt the movement travel up through her legs and into her spine, a vibration that wanted to break her bones into harmonic frequency.

She pulled the blade free and struck again. Deeper.

The Stone Dreamer's influence propagated upward. At ground level, the crack in the foundation slab widened. The project manager, awake in the site office at 2 AM, watching the same walls he'd watched for nine months, saw the concrete separate. Saw it widen like something below was pressing up, demanding passage.

Ace was beyond hearing. She was in the dark between strikes, in the moment where the blade sank into ancient stone and something very old convulsed. Her arms burned. The vibrations moved through her body and came out her hands and went back into the earth, a rhythm like conversation with something that had never learned to speak.

The face-impression fractured deeper. She found the edge of the fracture and drove her blade along it, opening the wound wider. The stone's response was violence—the ancient layer heaved, and the fill above her cascaded down in a storm of dirt and debris. She twisted her body sideways, kept her blades moving, drove them deeper into the fracture.

Something in the stone let go.

The pressure inverted. The vibration that had been rising from below reversed and collapsed downward, like a held breath released. The movement stopped.

Ace stood in the sudden silence, dust still falling around her, covered in earth, both blades driven deep into stone that no longer wanted to move.

She pulled them free and climbed out.

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The project manager was waiting at the top of the access ladder. His face had the look of someone who'd survived something he couldn't articulate.

"What was down there?" he asked. His voice was small.

Ace cleaned her blades on her pants, methodical, checking the emerald glow for any damage. The light was steady. The stone had not been kind to the steel, but the steel had been harder.

"Nothing now," she said.

She drove away before dawn. Behind her, the foundation slab lay cracked from end to end, the pattern complete. The project manager would spend the morning calling contractors, explaining what had happened, starting the paperwork for remediation and delays. He would sleep that night for the first time in two weeks. He would not remember his dreams.

The anomaly layer, when the structural engineers re-examined it, would show deep scoring marks on

the face-impression—something that looked like claw marks or blade-damage, the pattern of which they would discuss at length without reaching conclusion. They would make a note about it. Nobody would have a good explanation. The surface would eventually be resealed and the excavation would proceed, and the community center would be built, and the town would use it for sixty years.

But underneath, deep in the bedrock, in the dark space where the face-impression had warmed, there was only stone now. Cold. Silent. Empty for the first time since before the human mind had learned to count years.

The thing that had been looking up was looking no more.—

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Last update: **19/03/2026 11:42**

