

Episode 37 — The War Below the Field

The field was breathing.

Emerson stood at the fence line with his hands gripped on the worn wood, watching the surface of the east pasture move like the flank of something vast and sleeping. It was three in the morning. The cattle had refused to go into that field for two weeks, clustering instead at the southern fence, and Emerson had stopped trying to force them. A man who'd worked land for forty-three years learned to listen when animals spoke in their way.

The heaving was subtle—a rhythmic undulation that would have been invisible in daylight, that was barely visible now under the moon. But it was there. It was consistent. And it was getting worse.

He'd called the agricultural office on a Tuesday in early March. An inspector had come out, walked the field with a soil probe, and written a report that said “possible subsidence” in the careful language of people who'd found nothing and wanted to close the file. The inspector left. The field kept breathing.

By the end of the third week, things began pushing against the surface from below.

Not breaking through—not yet. Just pressing outward, creating domes in the soil that would flatten again by morning. Emerson had never seen anything like it. He'd seen frost heave in early spring, seen mole tunnels and root systems and the work of animals moving through earth. He'd never seen this: a purposeful pressure from below, distributed across the entire field in a pattern that looked almost like formation.

He called someone else. A name given to him by another farmer, one county over, who'd had his own problem three years back. The farmer had been cagey about what the problem was, but he'd been clear about the solution: “Call this number. Don't ask questions. She'll know.”

It took two days for Ace to arrive.

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She came in daylight, which surprised Emerson. He'd expected her at night, for some reason he couldn't articulate. But she pulled up to the farmhouse at four in the afternoon, parked her battered vehicle at the edge of the property, and walked the field while the sun was still high enough to cast shadows.

He watched her from the porch. She didn't move like someone exploring. She moved like someone reading text, her eyes on the ground, her pace deliberate and slow. She was in the field for forty-three minutes. Then she came back.

“How long?” she asked.

“Three weeks of surfacing. Six weeks of the breathing. Maybe more—I didn't notice at first.”

“The pattern you've seen. Is it the same each night?”

Emerson considered this. He'd watched long enough to notice variation. “No. It's moving. Slowly. But there's a direction to it. It's...” He gestured toward the southwest, toward the town visible at distance, maybe two kilometers down the county road. “That way. Toward population.”

Ace was quiet. She looked at the field, at the town, at the mathematics of distance and time.

"How deep are we talking?" she asked.

"Agricultural bureau says maybe subsidence. I'm guessing deeper. Maybe two meters. Maybe more—the pressure's too substantial for shallow."

Ace nodded. "It surfaces at full dark. It'll be vulnerable then, but only for hours. The entity's moving toward your town at a rate I can calculate if I spend time doing that math." She looked at Emerson directly. "How much time do I have?"

"If the pattern holds? Four days. Maybe five before it's under the town perimeter."

"Then I need tonight."

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Ace arrived at dusk with minimal equipment and no explanation of what she'd spent the day doing—studying the field, probably, reading the earth the way the other farmer had said she could. She parked her vehicle at the fence line and began walking the field as the sun went down, not waiting for full dark.

Emerson watched from the house, unable to help, unable to do anything but observe.

When the night became complete, the field changed.

It wasn't dramatic—no sudden upheaval, no visible rupture. It was more subtle and far worse: the earth began to move. The surface rippled. The undulation that had been sleeping-animal-subtle became something purposeful and vast. And then, in the center of the field, something emerged.

It came up through the soil like a tide rising, and for a moment Emerson thought the earth itself was bleeding. The shape was enormous—fifty meters across, maybe more, pushing upward from below. But it wasn't a single entity. It was a mass of forms, human-shaped or human-*derived*, fused at the edges and seams, moving in coordination. Figures without individual features, merged into something collective. An army crystallized into a single organism. The accumulated dead of a battlefield, still trying to advance.

The smell reached Emerson even at the house: copper and dust and the specific stench of things that had been underground too long.

Ace was still in the field.

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She moved across the heaving surface like she was looking for something specific, which she was. The entity's outer mass was too large to fight, too distributed. She could feel that immediately—the way it registered her presence without knowing what to do with her, the way it passed around her small body without stopping. It was oriented toward the town, toward the concentration of living people it could smell at distance. It didn't care about one small thing moving across its form.

She needed the core. The command center. The densest point where the coordinated dead gathered.

She found it by feel, the way she found things that shouldn't exist—by the way the pressure emanated from one place, the way the entity's movement rippled outward from a center point like waves from a stone dropped in still water. It was below the surface still, maybe two meters down,

compressed and accumulated and moving with slow, terrible purpose.

Ace descended.

She drove her emerald-glowing blades into the earth above the core, and the soil—which had been compressed, resistant, almost stone-like—parted as though she'd cut through something far more fragile. She went down into the darkness, into the space where the field's pressure was greatest, into the compressed knowledge of a hundred years of unburied dead.

In the weight and the dark, she found the core.

It was not a creature in the way she'd come to understand creatures. It was aggregation—density crystallized from grief and violence and the specific refusal of a mass of dying things to remain dead. It had no singular form. It had only weight and intention and the slow, terrible momentum of an army that would not stop advancing.

She cut it apart.

The first blow split it. The second scattered it. The third unmade whatever cohesion held the surrounding mass in coordination. She felt the moment it happened—the instant when the distributed entity lost its unified intention. The figures that had been moving as one mass suddenly became only bodies again.

Dead things in a field.

She pushed back to the surface through soil that no longer resisted her. She broke through the earth at the field's edge and stood in the dark, covered in soil, breathing hard for the first time in the night.

The field was still.

The surface, which had been heaved and fractured, began to settle. The great cracked lines that had been visible under the moon—the evidence of a mass formation, of an advance—slowly closed as the earth relaxed, as something vast and ancient finally stopped pressing against the boundary between underneath and above.

Emerson saw her standing at the field's edge, a small dark figure against the recovering ground. Then she turned away from the field and walked back toward the fence line.

He met her there. He didn't know what to say. She wiped earth from her face with the back of one hand.

"It's done," she said. It wasn't an explanation. It was just the end of a sentence she didn't bother to start.

She got in her vehicle. She drove away without looking back.

Emerson stood at the fence line for a long time after she was gone, looking at his field—his normal field, his calm field, his field that was finally just earth again. The cattle were still clustered at the southern fence, instinct strong enough that they wouldn't trust the field's appearance. But by morning, he thought, they would cross back. By morning, the field would smell like a field again, not like something ancient trying to remember how to move.

He walked back to the house. He did not write down what he'd seen. He did not call the agricultural

office. He did not tell anyone in town about the night the earth had heaved like a vast creature breathing its last breath.

Some things were better left in the dark, even when the dark was gone.

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