

## Episode 09 — The Well That Speaks Back



### Part One: The Hollow Hours

The well had taken three people in three weeks, and the village had decided to let it.

Marie Corbett's husband found her shoes at the stone lip, worn leather still warm from the day's heat. The rope she'd taken from the barn lay coiled beside them, one end frayed where it had torn against the edge. He'd looked down into that darkness and heard nothing but the far-off echo of something moving in the deep—a sound like water shifted in a throat too large for swallowing.

They didn't find Marie.

Two more after that: Thomas, who'd been cracking under the weight of losing his brother that winter and heard the boy's voice calling up from the black. Thomas went in on a humid night in early July when the temperature had only just begun to drop. His parents waited at the well until noon the next day before they stopped waiting.

Then old Vera. She'd outlived three husbands and apparently, in a moment of clarity or surrender or something the village wouldn't name, decided to join the fourth in whatever lay beneath the stone.

That was when they'd stopped using the well.

Now, in the worst part of summer, the village hauled water from the creek four kilometers away. Women made the trip daily, or in pairs on the worst days, struggling back with buckets that pulled their shoulders down. Crops withered in the fields. The heat had teeth—it bit at the edges of work, made thinking harder than it should have been, turned the dirt to fine powder that got into everything.

The village council wanted to fill the well with stones. Someone suggested they should pray first, but prayer seemed pointless now.

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Ace heard about it in a town sixty kilometers northwest, from a trader passing through. He was a man who bought and sold information with the same disinterest he applied to everything else—cattle, cloth, rumor. He'd mentioned it because she'd been sitting at his fire, still as rock, listening to his catalog of dead things and unfinished business.

“Well in a village called Kern,” he'd said, chewing on dried meat. “Taking people. Three that they know of. They're too frightened to go down after them.”

She'd asked the name of the village. He'd given it. She'd left the next morning.

The drive took eight hours in her vehicle—a compact thing, old, built for utility rather than comfort. She'd learned not to need comfort. The radio didn't work. The air conditioning had failed two years ago. She drove in silence, windows down, hand steady on the wheel, and thought about wells and what lived in them.

She arrived in Kern just before dusk.

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The village was small enough that it announced itself without ceremony: a crossroads with a grocery, a church, a handful of houses scattered on either side. The real heart of it was the central square, where the well stood. It was old stone, the lip worn smooth by centuries of hands drawing up water. The village had built around it the way towns always built around wells—this one had been there before the houses, before the roads, when there was nothing but the need for water and the luck of a spring running deep.

Now there was a rope coiled beside it, abandoned. A bucket nearby, also abandoned. The heat shimmered off the packed earth.

Ace parked her vehicle at the edge of the square and sat for a moment, observing. The village had done what frightened people do: they'd made a boundary. No one walked near the well now. There was a deliberate arc of empty space around it, thirty meters wide at least, as if proximity to the stone might transmit whatever had taken the three.

A woman was watching from a doorway. Ace noted her—middle-aged, calloused hands, eyes that had learned to be suspicious. Not hostile. Suspicious.

Ace got out of the vehicle and walked to the well.

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The woman from the doorway approached as Ace was studying the lip. She moved carefully, the way people do when they're approaching something they're not sure of.

"Help you?" the woman said. Not a question, quite.

"I'm looking for the well," Ace said.

"Found it."

Ace didn't respond. She continued examining the stone. The handprints were still visible on the lip—pressed marks in the light dust, fingernails having scraped against the stone on the way down. Three different sets. Three different pressures, different hand sizes. Marie had pressed hard. Thomas and Vera less so, as if they'd gone willingly, letting themselves be drawn rather than fighting the descent.

"People go in, they don't come out," the woman said. "Three of them. Heard things. Went down. We don't use it anymore."

"What did they hear?"

"Voices," the woman said. "From down there. People they knew. Dead people."

Ace dropped a stone down the well. It fell through darkness. She counted. Thirty-two seconds before she heard the distant splash of water. Very deep. Deeper than the water table should have been in a place like this, in a drought year.

"You have rope?"

"We do. We don't use the well."

"I'll need rope."

The woman's face did something complicated. "You looking to go down there? To kill yourself?"

"To kill what's down there," Ace said.

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Ace prepared in a matter-of-fact way that seemed to unsettle the villagers more than anything else. She showed no doubt, asked no questions about the logistics, took no advice. She simply looked at the well, looked at the rope—good rope, she noted, worn but strong—and began lashing it to the frame of her vehicle with the kind of precision that came from having done the same thing many times before.

The woman whose name was Clara brought her water. Ace drank it. Clara brought her food wrapped in cloth. Ace declined it without explanation.

"You're not going to tell us anything," Clara said. It wasn't a question.

"No," Ace agreed.

The sun went down. The village lights came on in the houses. Ace sat at the well's edge and waited for full dark.

When the night was complete—thick and airless and starless, clouds moving in with the promise of storm that would never come—she tied the rope around her waist, checked the anchor points one more time, drew both blades, and lowered herself over the edge.

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The descent was slow and cold.

The temperature dropped as she went down, the air changing from heat to cool to actually cold, and the smell changed with it. Stone and water and something else underneath—something organic and sweetly wrong, like fruit that had rotted in a closed room for months. She could hear it before she could see it: a wet, rhythmic sound from far below, like something breathing in a language that only used water.

The rope sang under her weight. She'd left the end wound around the vehicle's frame, anchored through the open window. It would hold her. It always did.

Thirty meters down. Forty. The darkness was absolute except for the faint phosphorescence beginning to gather around the edges of her vision—bioluminescence, living light coming from the thing below. The water was coming closer. She could hear it more clearly now, lapping against stone, and underneath it that other sound. The breathing sound.

She stopped herself about two meters above the surface, steadying herself against the well's stone walls with her feet and one blade's point, and looked down.

The water was black, mirror-still, and at its center was a faint glow. The glow had a shape: a pale opening, like a throat, impossibly wide. Impossibly deep. The water around it seemed to move in slow spirals toward that opening, a current that had no source and no destination except down.

She could see it now, as her eyes adjusted further: the thing had mass below the water level. The visible part was just the top—a funnel of pale tissue, almost translucent, lined on the inside with something that might have been teeth or might have been just the natural geometry of its structure. The funnel extended up into the water, and she could sense, though not see, the true shape of it below: far broader, far deeper. The well was just its mouth.

For a moment, it was silent.

Then: "Come down."

The voice was masculine and warm and it was the voice of the farmer whose wife was named Marie. "Come down. It's cold down here. Please come down."

Ace didn't respond. She descended.

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The voice changed as she got closer. It cycled through registers like a thing trying to find the right frequency. It became Thomas's voice—young, frightened, but insistent. Then a child's voice, higher, older, a girl's voice, none of them people she'd lost and all of them trying.

She went underwater.

The cold was absolute and immediate, shocking despite her preparation. She was conscious of the

rope above her, still anchored, still holding, and then she was past thinking about anything but the water and the light and the vast pale shape below her that was no longer gently opening but actively expanding, drawing everything down into its funnel-throat.

The current took her. She let it.

The entity's interior was lined with something not quite tissue—something that had the texture of living muscle but the translucence of cartilage. She could see through it into the broader body below, which was filled with light and color—digested things, incorporated things, bits of what it had taken. She swam down through her own sinking, keeping her blades moving, letting the current take her deeper, and when she felt the narrowing—where the funnel condensed into something more solid—she stopped fighting the current and pressed forward instead.

The walls of the funnel became harder, denser. She cut, driving both blades in at perpendicular angles, and felt something yield. The interior of the thing was softer than the exterior. Its own geometry was its weakness. She drove deeper, bleeding from her nose now, or perhaps drowning—the distinction seemed unimportant—and found the core.

It was like finding the center of a fist: dense, coordinating, the point where the distributed neural activity of the thing collected into something that could understand pain. She destroyed it.

The thing's scream translated into the water as pressure, as temperature, as a kind of vibration that rattled her teeth. The current reversed, no longer pulling down but trying to expel her, a convulsion of something dying. She rode it upward, letting the rope take her weight when the pull became too fierce, and broke the surface gasping.

The light above was agony. Real light, starlight, the absolute darkness of the well shaft suddenly visible. She was bleeding from her ears, from her nose, from capillaries that had burst under the pressure change. But the rope was there. She grabbed it, pulled herself up, one hand over the other, and climbed.

The stone was rough under her hands and then smooth and then rough again. Her blades were still in her grip, though she had no memory of keeping them there. The exit was black and then a slightly less absolute black and then grey and then she was pulling herself over the lip of the well, collapsing on the packed earth beside it, breathing water and blood and the smell of something dead.

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## **Part Two: After**

She sat at the well's edge for a long time.

The sky was lightening in the east—not quite dawn, but the promise of it, the way the black became dark blue became something that might soon be colors again. She was wet and cold and something in her chest hurt with the kind of hurt that came from near-drowning. Her hands were still shaking, not from fear but from the simple reality of adrenaline burning through her body and being replaced by exhaustion.

The rope had held. The rope always held. This was what mattered.

The village woke up slowly. She heard it: roosters, the sound of a door opening, someone pumping water from somewhere else. Eventually, someone noticed her. It was Clara, coming to check on the well, and she stopped short when she saw Ace sitting there, muddy and bleeding and very much

alive.

“Is it—” Clara didn't finish the question. She looked at the well, then at Ace, then at the well again.

“It's done,” Ace said.

She got up. It took more effort than she wanted to admit. Her legs were barely reliable. But she walked to her vehicle, pulled the rope free, coiled it, threw it in the back. She didn't look back at Clara or at the well or at the square of the village.

By the time she reached the car's seat, Clara was crying. Not loudly, not dramatically. Just crying, standing in the square, finally allowing herself to believe that the well would be safe again. That her people could have their water back. That the thing that had taken Marie and Thomas and Vera was gone.

Ace started the engine. She drove north, away from Kern, away from the coast, toward the next town, the next whisper, the next place where something lived that shouldn't.

Behind her, the village began to gather around the well again. Not to use it yet—that would take time, trust, a kind of forgetting. But to stand near it. To remember that it had been theirs before the darkness came, and it would be theirs again.

The well itself was silent.

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