

TIDEPOOL

"Recruitment"

Episode 102

Written by

[First Draft]

COLD OPEN

EXT. CANNON BEACH - ROCKY SHORE - SITE 7 - DAWN

CLOSE ON the juvenile sea star from the end of Episode 1. Twenty millimeters of *Pisaster ochraceus*, tucked in its northeast crevice. Still there.

Pull back to reveal Lena, crouched in the same position we left her. Different day -- different light, different jacket. But the posture is identical. She photographs the juvenile, writes in her notebook. Measures it again with calipers.

LENA (V.O.)

Day four. Still attached. Twenty-one millimeters -- marginal growth, within expected range. Positioned in the same crevice, northeast wall. No predation marks. No sign of dislodgment.

She caps her pen. Studies the tiny star for another moment. There is something in the looking that goes past scientific observation -- a faint tenderness she would never name.

LENA (V.O.)

Early recruitment is precarious. Most juveniles don't survive their first month. They get eaten, dislodged by waves, outcompeted for space. The ones that make it aren't necessarily the strongest. They just found the right crevice.

Behind her, footsteps on rock. Marco, picking his way down from the parking area. His Xtratufs are slightly less new now -- a scuff on the left toe, some salt residue. Progress.

MARCO

(still ten meters away)

Morning. How's Site Seven?

LENA

The recruit is still here.

MARCO

The little Pisaster? No way. Can
I see?

He crouches beside her. She shifts slightly to give him a
sight line but doesn't move away from the pool. Their
shoulders are perhaps eighteen inches apart. For Lena,
this is close.

MARCO

Look at that guy. Hanging in
there.

LENA

It grew a millimeter.

MARCO

That's like -- what, five percent
body growth in four days?

LENA

(the faintest smile)
Roughly.

MARCO

Does it have a name?

LENA

It has a species name.

MARCO

I mean like a name name.

LENA

We don't name them.

MARCO

Sure. No. Of course not.
Beat. They both look at the juvenile star.

MARCO

I'm going to call it Steve.
Lena doesn't respond. She puts the lens cap on her camera
and stands up. But as she turns to walk to the next site,
her mouth does something it doesn't usually do. Not quite

a smile. More like the muscles remembering where a smile goes.

TITLE CARD: TIDEPPOOL

END COLD OPEN

ACT ONE

INT. COASTAL RESEARCH STATION - COMMON AREA - DAY

All-staff meeting. Which means: Lena, Patricia, Doug, Marco, and LINDA OKORO (50s), the station director -- a tall woman in reading glasses who carries herself with the particular exhaustion of someone who manages scientists on a government salary. They sit around a table with bad coffee.

LINDA

I'm not going to sugarcoat this. NSF deferred our renewal application. Not rejected -- deferred. But the panel's feedback was pretty clear. They want to see higher-impact output relative to operational costs.

DOUG

Higher impact meaning what? More papers?

LINDA

More papers, more citations, more collaboration with university programs. They specifically flagged that our publication rate has been flat for three years.

The camera finds Lena. She's listening with her hands flat on the table. Her face is still. This is her publication rate they're talking about. Patricia does seabird surveys and publishes regularly. Doug is winding down. Lena is the station's primary intertidal researcher and she has published two papers in three years. Both were data summaries. Neither made a splash.

PATRICIA

When do we hear back?

LINDA

Resubmission window is September. That gives us four months to strengthen the application. I need updated CVs from everyone, a revised research plan, and ideally something in press or under review by then.

She looks at Lena when she says this. Not pointedly -- Linda is kind. But the look is there.

LINDA

Lena, your long-term data set is the strongest asset we have. Nine years of continuous monitoring -- that's rare. But the panel wants to see it doing something. Analysis, synthesis, something beyond the annual reports.

LENA

The value of the data is in its continuity.

LINDA

I know that. You know that. The panel wants a paper that proves it.

Lena nods once. Meeting over. People stand, refill coffee, drift back to their desks. Marco lingers.

MARCO

(quietly, to Lena)

Your SSWD recovery data -- have you looked at it as a comparative? Like, recovery trajectories across sites with different wave exposure?

LENA

I've thought about it.

MARCO

Because Rosen's been trying to get comparable data sets for the central coast and there's nothing this long. If you published a recovery analysis with nine years of site-specific data, people would lose their minds.

Lena looks at him. He's not wrong. Again. This is becoming a pattern.

LENA

I'll think about it.

She goes to her desk. Marco watches her for a moment -- not with romantic interest, but with the baffled concern of someone who has just watched a person receive useful advice and treat it like an inconvenience.

EXT. CANNON BEACH - BEACH - LATE MORNING

Lena walks the beach. Not monitoring -- just walking. This is unusual. She doesn't have a tide window for another four hours and she is, visibly, at a loss for what to do with unstructured time.

She walks past the stretch where the runner with the golden retriever usually appears. No runner today -- wrong time. She walks past a family building a sand castle. Past two women on beach chairs sharing a thermos of something. Past a man throwing a tennis ball for a border collie that is having the best day of its life.

Lena watches the dog. Specifically, she watches the unself-conscious joy of an animal doing the thing it was designed to do. She watches for longer than a person normally watches a stranger's dog.

She keeps walking. The beach curves south toward Hug Point. Fewer people here. She finds a log and sits. Takes out her phone. Opens her email. Rereads the NSF deferral that Linda forwarded. Then she opens a blank document and types a title:

"Recovery dynamics of *Pisaster ochraceus* in the northern Oregon rocky intertidal: a nine-year monitoring study."

She stares at it. Types a sentence. Deletes it. Types another sentence. Deletes it. Puts the phone away. Looks at the ocean.

LENA (V.O.)

The difficulty with long-term data is that it resists narrative. It doesn't build to a conclusion. It accumulates. Each year modifies the picture but doesn't resolve it. You can describe what happened but you can't say what it means, because it isn't finished.

She pulls the phone back out. Not the paper this time. She opens Yumi's text thread. The last exchange, from the previous episode, still visible: Yumi's "Call me when you have a sec?" and Lena's "Will try later this week."

It has been eight days.

Lena puts the phone away again. Stands up. Walks back toward town.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - VARIOUS SITES - AFTERNOON

Afternoon tide window. Lena and Marco work together now -- they've developed a rhythm over the past week. She takes the upper intertidal zones, he takes the lower. They leapfrog site to site. He's getting faster. His IDs are more confident. He still slips on the rockweed occasionally.

At Site 3, Marco is working below Lena on the rock bench. He's on his phone between quadrats -- texting, smiling at the screen.

MARCO

(looking up from his phone)

Hey, have you been to Mo's? The chowder place in Lincoln City?

LENA

No.

MARCO

My friend Becca -- she tends bar at the Wayfarer -- she says it's kind of a tourist trap but the chowder is actually legit.

LENA

(counting anemones)

Becca.

MARCO

Yeah, we met at -- well, she's just someone I've been hanging out with.

He says this with the performative casualness of a 26-year-old who wants to talk about a girl. Lena recognizes the energy without quite placing it.

LENA

That's nice.

MARCO

Yeah. She's cool. She surfs, which is kind of insane in this water.

LENA

Mm.

MARCO

Do you -- is there someone? Like, are you --

He stops himself. Even at 26 he can feel the edge of the question before he reaches it.

MARCO

Sorry. None of my business.

LENA

(neutral, not cold)

It's fine. No. There's no one.
She says this the way she would say the water temperature is 11 degrees. A measurement. She goes back to her quadrat. Marco watches her for a moment, then goes back to his.

The camera holds on Lena working. Her face is placid. Her hands are steady. "There's no one" hung in the air and she didn't hear it land. The audience did.

INT. COASTAL RESEARCH STATION - LAB - EVENING

Late. Patricia and Doug have gone home. Lena sits at her desk. She has her nine years of data open on the screen -- a massive spreadsheet, tabs for each site, columns for species, density, quadrat position, date, tidal height, water temperature. It's meticulous. It's also, as a piece of writing, completely inert.

She opens a new document. Types the same title she tried on the beach: the recovery dynamics paper. Forces herself past the title this time. Writes an abstract. It's stiff, dutiful, packed with jargon. She reads it back. It's accurate. It's also the kind of abstract that makes a reviewer's eyes glaze over.

She puts her head in her hands. Not dramatically -- just tired. This is a person who can crouch over a tidepool for three hours in the rain but cannot write a paragraph about why it matters.

Marco appears in the doorway. He's got his backpack on, heading out.

MARCO

Still here?

LENA

Trying to start the paper.

MARCO

How's it going?

LENA

The data resists narrative.

MARCO

(leaning in the doorway)
What do you mean?

LENA

I mean I have nine years of observations and I can tell you exactly what happened at every site, every season. But when I try to write it as a story -- as a paper with a point -- I can't find the shape. It just... accumulates.

MARCO

Maybe the accumulation is the point.

LENA

That's not how papers work.

MARCO

No, I mean -- the thing that makes your data set unique is that nobody else stayed this long. Everybody else got funding for two or three years and then moved on. You stayed. That's the story. Why did this one researcher at this one station keep going when everyone else stopped?

He means this as a scientific framing question. The audience hears the personal one. Lena hears it too, somewhere underneath, and deflects.

LENA

Because the data set isn't useful until it's long enough. Stopping early would have wasted everything that came before.

MARCO

(gently)
Right. So write that.

He waves goodnight and leaves. Lena sits with what he said. After a moment, she deletes her abstract and starts again. This time she writes slower, but the words seem to come from a different place.

INT. LENA'S COTTAGE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Late. Lena at the kitchen table with her laptop, working on the paper. She's making progress -- the screen shows two pages of text now. Not good text necessarily, but text. Movement.

Her phone buzzes. Not a text this time -- a call. The screen reads YUMI.

Lena looks at the phone. It rings three times. She picks up.

LENA

Hi.

YUMI

(on phone, warm)

Oh! You picked up. I was ready for voicemail.

LENA

Sorry. I've been -- it's been a busy couple weeks.

YUMI

No, it's fine. I just wanted to hear your voice. The kids made a volcano for the science fair. Baking soda. It was a whole thing.

LENA

Did it work?

YUMI

It worked too well. There's red food coloring on the ceiling of the garage.

Lena almost laughs. Not quite -- but closer than usual. They're quiet for a moment. The easy quiet of siblings who

don't talk enough but still have the rhythm.

YUMI

So how are you? How's the work?

LENA

We have a funding issue. NSF deferred our renewal. I need to write a paper.

YUMI

That sounds stressful. Are you okay?

LENA

I have a new graduate student at the station. He's studying recovery dynamics. And we found a juvenile Pisaster at Site Seven -- first recruitment there in three years. It's only twenty-one millimeters but it's attached in a good crevice, good orientation, so the survival probability is actually --

YUMI

(gentle, interrupting)

Lena.

LENA

What?

YUMI

I asked how you are. Not the starfish.

Pause. Lena opens her mouth. Closes it. Tries again.

LENA

I'm fine. I'm the same.

YUMI

Yeah. That's what worries me sometimes.

She says it lightly enough that Lena can choose not to hear it. Lena chooses not to hear it.

LENA

How's Jay?

YUMI

He's good. He's on a work trip, so I'm solo with the kids, which is why I'm calling you at ten on a Wednesday like a person with no friends.

LENA

You have friends.

YUMI

(a beat)

So do you, Lena. You just don't call them.

Lena is quiet. This is the closest Yumi has come to saying it outright, and they both feel the edge. Yumi backs off.

YUMI

Anyway. Send me a picture of the little starfish. The kids would love it.

LENA

Okay. I will.

YUMI

Love you.

LENA

Love you too.

They hang up. Lena sets the phone down. She sits very still for a moment. Then she opens her photo library, finds the close-up of the juvenile star, and sends it to Yumi. She adds no text. Just the photo.

Three dots appear. Then a reply: a string of heart emojis and "I LOVE STEVE."

Lena stares at the screen. She didn't tell Yumi the name Marco gave it. Which means Marco told someone. Or posted it. Or something. The world just got slightly less contained than Lena is used to.

She types: "His name isn't Steve." Sends it. Immediately types: "That's just what the grad student calls it." Sends that too.

Yumi: "LOL sure. Goodnight Lena. Go to bed."

Lena closes the laptop. She goes to bed. But first she puts her mug in the sink. And first -- before even that -- she looks at the photo of the juvenile star one more time on her phone.

She does not name it. But she doesn't not name it either.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - SITE 7 - DAWN

Dawn again. Lena at Site 7. Alone -- Marco doesn't come to every morning session. The runner with the golden retriever passes. Nod. Wave. The rhythm of the show: tides, light, the same gestures repeated with tiny variations.

She checks the juvenile star. Still there. She photographs it. Notes the growth. Her voiceover is pure data, pure science.

LENA (V.O.)

Day eleven. Twenty-three millimeters. Growth rate consistent. Holding position.

She moves through her sites. The work is beautiful when filmed this way -- the colors of the intertidal zone at dawn, the precision of her method, the slow reveal of each pool as the water drops. This is what she's good at. This is where she makes sense.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - SITE 4 - LATER

Site 4, the large complex pool. Lena is working the lower section when she hears voices -- the couple from Episode 1, or a couple like them, picking their way down the

rocks. A WOMAN (30s) and a MAN (30s), tourists, carrying coffees.

WOMAN

Oh look -- tidepools! Can we go down there?

MAN

Careful, it's slippery.
They spot Lena and hesitate -- the way you do when you find someone already occupying a space you assumed was empty.

WOMAN

Sorry, are we -- is this a research thing?

LENA

It's fine. Just watch where you step.
The couple edges closer. The woman crouches near a pool adjacent to the one Lena's working on.

WOMAN

Oh my God. Look at the colors. What is this purple thing?

LENA

Sea urchin. *Strongylocentrotus purpuratus*.

WOMAN

They're so beautiful. Do they just live here?

LENA

They do. They graze the algae off the rock. If you remove them, the algae takes over and the whole community shifts.

WOMAN

You study this? Like, for a living?

LENA

Yes.

WOMAN

(to the man, genuinely
enchanted)

Can you imagine? Coming here
every day and just... looking at
this?

Lena hears this. A stranger finding wonder in the thing she does -- the thing she has made so routine that the wonder has become invisible to her. It lands somewhere she wasn't expecting.

LENA

The best time to come is a minus
tide. You can check the NOAA
tables online. Next good one is
Thursday morning, around six.

WOMAN

Thank you! We'll be gone by then
but -- thank you.

The couple moves on, coffees in hand, pointing at things. Lena watches them go. She turns back to her quadrat. After a moment, she looks up from the data -- really looks -- at the pool in front of her. As if seeing it. Not measuring. Seeing.

Then she goes back to counting. But something has shifted, a fraction of a degree, like a compass needle bumped.

INT. COASTAL RESEARCH STATION - LAB - DAY

Lena at her desk. She's writing. Not the stiff abstract from before -- something looser. We catch a glimpse of the screen: she's writing the introduction to the paper, and it starts with a description of what it's like to return to the same twelve sites for nine years. What you see. What changes. What doesn't.

It reads less like a journal article and more like someone trying, for the first time, to explain to another human being why she does what she does.

Patricia passes behind her on the way to the coffee machine. Glances at the screen. Stops.

PATRICIA

Is that the paper?

LENA

It's a draft. It's rough.

PATRICIA

(reading over her shoulder)

Lena, this is good. This is really good.

LENA

(surprised)

It's just the introduction.

PATRICIA

It sounds like you. It doesn't usually sound like you -- your papers, I mean. This one does.

Lena doesn't know what to do with this. She's received compliments on her data before. Never on her voice.

LENA

Thank you.

Patricia pours her coffee and goes back to her desk. Lena looks at the screen. She reads her own words. It's the expression of someone encountering a part of themselves they'd filed away -- not lost, just archived in a drawer they stopped opening.

EXT. CANNON BEACH - ROCKY SHORE - MAGIC HOUR

End of the day. The light is golden. Lena is done with her monitoring but hasn't left the rocks. She sits above Site 7, where the juvenile star is tucked in its crevice below, invisible from this distance.

The tide is coming in. Water starts to reconnect the pools to each other, to the ocean. The isolation of low tide ending. Everything connected again.

LENA (V.O.)

When the tide returns, the pools reopen. Nutrients flow in. Larvae disperse. The system breathes. For a few hours, every pool is

part of something larger than
itself.

Lena's phone is in her hand. She opens Yumi's thread.
Types: "The kids' volcano sounds amazing. Do they want to
see more tidepool pictures? I have a lot."

She sends it. It's not much. It's not the visit. It's not
the call Yumi was really asking for. But it's a message
sent without being prompted. That has not happened in this
show before.

Three dots. Then: "YES. They will lose their tiny minds.
Send everything."

Lena starts scrolling through her camera roll. She has
thousands of photos -- years of monitoring images. She's
never shared them with anyone outside the station. She
selects a few: a bright orange sea cucumber. A sunflower
star. An anemone eating a mussel, caught mid-swallow. She
sends them one at a time.

Yumi sends back voice memos of the kids reacting.
Screaming. Laughing. "THAT'S SO GROSS." "SEND MORE." "IS
THAT REAL?"

Lena listens to the voice memos on the rocks above Site 7,
the ocean coming in below her, and for a moment she is
connected to something beyond the pools and the data and
the cottage and the canned soup.

She looks at the ocean. Not studying it. Just looking.

LENA (V.O.)

You can't predict recruitment.
You can describe the conditions
that make it possible -- open
substrate, adequate flow, the
right season. But whether a larva
actually settles, whether it
attaches, whether it holds on...
that's not something you control.
You just monitor. And you hope.

Wide shot. Lena on the rocks, phone in hand, the ocean
filling in around her. She stays a little longer than she
needs to. Then she walks back to her car.

Her Subaru is not the only car in the parking lot this time. Marco's rental is there too -- he's sitting on the hood, on his phone, waiting for something. Probably Becca. He looks up and waves. Lena waves back.

MARCO

Good session?

LENA

Steve grew another millimeter.
It takes Marco a second. Then he grins. Lena gets in her car and pulls out of the lot. In the rearview mirror, Marco is still grinning.

Lena drives. She doesn't smile. But the muscles remember.

END OF EPISODE