

Episode 10 — Salt and Teeth



Part One: The Flat

The salt flat stretched from the sea cliffs inland for nearly eight kilometers, a white expanse so bright in midday sun that looking at it directly caused a particular kind of pain—not in the eyes so much as behind them, deep in the visual cortex, a sensation like something burning in the brain. At dawn and dusk it turned pink, a pale organic color that made it look almost alive. At night it was grey and black and reflected stars in ways that made the horizon uncertain.

The village of Sola was two kilometers from the flat's edge, a fishing settlement built on the assumption that the sea was the only real source of danger. It took a hundred years for them to understand about the salt.

People used to harvest salt from it. That was before. When it was just a natural wonder, geometric and profitable, something that could be taken and sold without consequence. Then a man named Ortega went out with his brother and came back alone, and his brother was found three days later standing in the flat's center with his eyes open and his arms at his sides, covered entirely in a white crystalline glaze so complete that his features were barely readable. He was standing upright, which meant that whatever had taken him had arrested him in the moment of the taking. He was a monument now, not a body.

That was thirty years ago.

The flat had developed a reputation. Locals didn't cross it anymore. The harvest stopped. Tourists occasionally tried—ignorant or foolish or testing themselves against something they didn't understand. The village usually managed to talk them out of it. Sometimes they managed to warn them away. Sometimes they came back preserved.

By the count of the last few years, there were eleven of them standing in the flat's center. The oldest—a woman named Petra who'd disappeared in spring three years previous—was so heavily mineralized that she'd become part of the landscape itself, her edges blurring into the crust. The newest was a man from the city, probably a hiker, almost certainly lost. He'd been there for six months, and already he was losing definition.

The village stopped counting after that.

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A fisherman named Davos took a shortcut across the flat at dawn because he was late and his boat was pulling at its anchor, impatient for him.

He knew better. Everyone knew better. But he was forty-three and tired in a way that sleep didn't fix, and the shortcut would save him an hour of walking, and an hour of walking felt like it might mean the difference between a productive day and a wasted one. In the gray light before real sunrise, the flat didn't look as dangerous. It just looked like salt.

He made it halfway across before stopping.

His lungs were burning from the walk—the salt crust was harder than he'd remembered, and his knees weren't what they had been, and the weight of years of fishing settled differently on his body than it used to. He bent over, hands on his thighs, breathing. The air was cool still, but he could feel the sun beginning to gather in the east. Another hour and the flat would be unbearable to cross.

That was when he saw the figure.

It was standing about two hundred meters away, off to his left, perfectly motionless. At first, he thought it was a cairn, one of the stone markers the old salt harvesters had left behind. But as his eyes focused, he realized it had a human shape. A woman's shape. Arms at her sides, standing with the strange stillness of something that had been there for a very long time.

He knew that silhouette. The way she held her shoulders. The shape of her hair.

"Petra?" he called.

The figure didn't move.

He took one step toward her, and his boot didn't lift cleanly. There was resistance—like stepping in thick mud, or quicksand, or water that had thickened into something else. He looked down. The salt around his heel was moving. Not flowing, but crystallizing, the crust solidifying around the leather and rubber of his boot, adhering it to the flat.

He pulled. His heel came free, but the boot sole left behind a faint outline where it had been, a negative space in the crystal that was already beginning to fill.

He ran.

He didn't look back at Petra, didn't look back at anything. He just ran, and the flat, despite its hardness, gave beneath his feet—that strange, resistant yield of something that was simultaneously solid and hungry. When he reached the flat's edge, he fell to his knees and stripped off the boot, throwing it behind him, then removed the other and left it as well. He ran barefoot into the scrubland, into the stunted grass and razor-sharp plants, and didn't stop until he reached the village.

By the time he made it to the harbor master's office, he was making a sound that wasn't quite language, and it took three fishermen to keep him from running into the sea.

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Ace arrived five days later.

She'd been tracking a pattern across the coastal region: disappearances that didn't fit the usual taxonomy of accidents and crimes. A woman who walked into the sea but left no body. A hiker found standing perfectly still in the woods, dead but not decomposed. A fisherman discovered in a tidal pool with his arms at his sides and his eyes open, every cell of his body turned to some kind of crystalline structure. At first, she'd thought distributed organism—something that invaded bodies and converted them. But the preservation was too complete, too clean. The victims weren't being destroyed; they were being incorporated. They were becoming part of something.

The reports pointed to the salt flat near Sola. She drove there directly, parked at the village's edge, and walked to the flat's margin on foot.

She stood at the boundary between scrubland and salt for a long time, observing.

The flat was larger than the descriptions had suggested. It ran in two directions—she could see the curve of it toward the distant sea cliffs on one side, and on the other, it simply extended into the heat haze, disappearing into its own white. The surface was deceptively uniform, but if she looked closely, there were patterns in the crust: subtle geometric formations that suggested growth. The salt had not formed randomly. It had organized itself. It was continuing to organize.

At the flat's center—she had to squint against the glare to see it clearly—there were the figures Davos had told the harbor master about. Eleven of them, standing in a rough line. The preservation was remarkable. From this distance, they didn't look dead so much as they looked paused. As if the moment of crystallization had simply arrested their motion at the point of deepest surprise.

She began to walk into the flat.

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The key was movement. Ace understood this immediately, the way her instinct understood things faster than language could articulate them. The entity—and she was certain, from the moment her boots touched the crust, that this was a single distributed organism occupying the entire flat—responded to stillness. The moment she stopped moving, she could feel it: a faint pressure against the soles of her feet, a warmth that shouldn't have been there, a gentle adhesive quality beginning to work at the leather and rubber and, potentially, at her skin.

She kept moving.

It was like dancing with something that couldn't quite follow the rhythm. She moved in spirals toward

the center, keeping her pace steady but never stopping, never allowing even a moment of stillness. The flat beneath her feet was rough—the salt crystals were surprisingly sharp—and she could feel them through her boots, cutting faintly at the fabric. But that was acceptable. Being pierced slowly was preferable to being incorporated.

As she got closer to the center, the warmth became more pronounced. The salt crust here was whiter, more crystalline, more obviously the manifestation of something alive and organized. The figures standing in the center became more detailed. She could see their faces now—mouths open slightly, eyes focused on nothing, their expressions precisely matching the moment of their realization. This one had understood. That one had still been hoping. This older woman had simply accepted.

Ace stopped moving only long enough to examine them more carefully, shifting her weight constantly, keeping one foot in motion even as she looked. The crystallization was complete and beautiful in a terrible way—every line of clothing, every strand of hair, every eyelash preserved in perfect detail. They hadn't been stripped and processed. They'd been taken and transformed while remaining exactly as they were. Except for the eyes. The eyes had a glaze over them that suggested they'd been conscious of the transformation, at least for part of it.

She found what she was looking for near the center of the gathered figures: a darker patch of the salt crust, roughly hexagonal, pushed slightly below the surface. It was warmer than the rest of the flat—she could feel the heat radiating from it even from a meter away. This was the seed crystal, the original point from which the entity had grown outward in a slow, patient expansion. This was what would keep it alive indefinitely if left alone.

She needed to destroy it.

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Part Two: The Crystalline Truth

The digging had to happen quickly, and it had to happen while she maintained constant motion. Ace positioned herself above the seed crystal and began to excavate with her right hand while keeping her left foot and her entire lower body in continuous motion—shifting her weight, stepping in place, moving in small circles. Her fingers worked at the salt, breaking it apart, pulling out chunks, but she could feel the entity responding: the warmth around her hands became focused, intense. The salt began to crystallize against her skin, working its way up her wrists, beginning to fuse with the fabric of her gloves.

She worked faster.

The seed crystal was resistant to standard physical pressure—she had to use her combat blade's tip to lever it upward from its bed, and the moment the blade touched it, she felt the entire flat shudder. The response was immediate and coordinated: the figures standing in the center all turned their heads toward her at once. Not in the natural way that necks could turn. Their entire bodies rotated, jerky and wrong, the crystal in their joints grinding audibly.

Then they began to move toward her.

It was not fast. Their legs were stiff, their motion wooden, but it was coordinated and purposeful. The flat itself seemed to be moving them, animating them, the entity using them as extensions of its will. There were eleven of them. They were converging on her position. And she was still extracting the seed crystal, still working one-handed while keeping her lower body in motion, and the crystallization was creeping up her forearms now, reaching toward her elbows.

The seed crystal came free.

Ace pulled it from the ground—it was the size of a closed fist, warm and smooth and dark compared to the white salt surrounding it. She drove both blades through it simultaneously. The moment the emerald light of her weapons touched the crystal, the flat convulsed. The white crust rippled like waves in water that had no water. The eleven figures froze mid-step.

Then she ran.

The figures were slower than she was, but they were closing the distance because they weren't constrained by the need to keep moving to avoid absorption. They could stop, and the entity could move them regardless. She had to dodge between them, using her superior speed and agility. The first one she encountered, she killed: a clean strike across the neck, and the figure shattered—not bled, shattered, breaking apart into large crystalline fragments that fell to the flat and lay there, inert. The next one came at her in a shuffling run, and she killed it the same way. And the next. And the next.

By the fourth one, she realized they were becoming fragile. The destruction of the seed crystal had severed whatever coherence the entity maintained over them. They were no longer being operated with precision. They were being operated with desperation, like a drowning thing flailing. The crystal in their joints was grinding itself apart from the inside out, the animation that kept them moving degrading moment by moment.

She killed the remaining seven without significant difficulty.

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She walked out of the flat before dawn fully completed its transformation into daylight.

One of her boots was partially fused—she'd spent too long stopped while extracting the seed crystal, and the salt had adhered to the sole. She had to break it free at the flat's edge, pulling her foot up hard, leaving behind a chunk of rubber and leather embedded in the crust. The crystallization on her hands and forearms was more superficial—it would take a few days to fully fade, and her fingers were going to be unusually sensitive until the damage to the outer layer of skin healed.

She didn't look back.

Behind her, the eleven figures lay where they'd fallen, shattered and inert. They were still on the flat—she had no way to retrieve them, and they were no longer a threat. They were simply remains now, part of the landscape. The salt flat would continue to preserve them, but without the entity to animate them, that preservation was meaningless. They were just bodies again.

The flat itself was silent. The overwhelming sense of hunger and presence that had radiated from it was gone, replaced by simple, inanimate geology. The salt crust would still be dangerous to cross—there would still be residual adhesive properties, still be risk if someone stopped for too long—but the intelligence was gone. The distributed organism that had fed on visitors for decades had been reduced to its base components.

Ace reached her vehicle, sat down in the driver's seat, and spent a moment letting her hands stop shaking before she started the engine. The vehicle was old and reliable and asked nothing of her, and she was grateful for that as she drove away from Sola, away from the flat, away from the coast.

The fishermen who'd lost their shortcut would eventually recover it. The village would eventually tell

the story of how one of the standing figures had come down and killed the others. Or it would become legend. Or it would be forgotten entirely. These things always were.

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← :demon-hunt-years:episode9 ^ :demon-hunt-years:start ^ :demon-hunt-years:episode11 →

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Last update: **22/03/2026 14:34**

