

Episode 17 — Teeth in the Foundation

The knocking started at 3:47 AM on a Tuesday, which meant it was Thursday by the time anyone official was willing to take it seriously. Nurse Margaret Hollis had been working the night shift in the east wing of Garfield County Hospital for fourteen years, long enough to distinguish between the normal sounds of an old building and the sounds that meant something was wrong. The normal sounds were the creaking of settling timbers, the rattle of pipes carrying hot water through the walls, the groan of the structure as the temperature dropped at night. Those sounds were rhythm. They were comfort in their predictability.

The knocking was not rhythm. The knocking was a pattern, and patterns suggested intention.

It started in the wall outside room 8 and moved, over the course of an hour, down the entire east corridor—a steady, patient, deliberate sound like something tapping in morse code that no human being alive had ever learned. Margaret made notes. Margaret called maintenance. Maintenance came at five in the morning with flashlights and equipment designed for hunting hidden leaks and found nothing. The walls were solid. The pipes were all accounted for. There was no source for the knocking.

By seven in the morning, the night shift was over and the day shift had arrived. The knocking stopped. Margaret went home and slept a sleep that wasn't quite restful, waking periodically with the rhythm of that tapping still playing in her ears.

It happened again the following night. And the night after that.

On the fourth night, Margaret was alone in the corridor at 3 AM, making rounds, when the knocking came from directly behind the wall panel in room 8. The patient in that room was an elderly man recovering from hip surgery. He was sleeping, his breathing steady, his monitors showing nothing alarming. But the knocking was so close, so immediate, that Margaret could feel it vibrating in her own chest.

She paused outside the room. The knocking continued. And then, in a gap in the rhythm, something else: movement. Not in the wall but in the wall itself, as though the physical substance of the plasterboard was being displaced from within. A section of the wall panel shifted—just barely, less than a centimeter—and something white showed in the gap.

A fingertip.

Margaret screamed. The sound she made was pure and involuntary and echoed through the corridor like a siren. The patient in room 8 woke up. The night security guard came running. By the time anyone else arrived at the room, the wall panel was solid again and there was nothing to see except Margaret's face, white and terrified, and her explanation that made no sense to anyone but her.

They looked for bones in the walls. They found nothing. They looked for structural damage. They found that the hospital's foundation was exactly as old as the building itself—over a hundred years—and that there was a cemetery beneath it, documented in the county records but forgotten except in passing reference during historical society talks.

They noted it on the incident report. They filed it. They moved on.

But Margaret Hollis knew what she had seen. And when the first patient in the east wing developed an infection that spread in patterns no infection should spread, following pathways that were geometric and wrong, she thought about the fingertip. When the patient died, despite antibiotics and intervention, she thought about it more. When the second patient developed the same infection, in

the same pattern, she started leaving notes about the knocking, about the things she heard at night in the walls.

No one listened. The hospital was underfunded and old and there were a thousand explanations for infection and death that didn't involve anything impossible. The house of medicine did not include rooms for things that knocked from beneath the foundation.

But Margaret kept track. By the third death, three months after the first night of knocking, she had stopped trying to convince people and had instead begun to research. She found a number—passed through channels so circuitous that she wasn't sure she believed it herself—and she made a call to a voice that didn't identify itself and said only: **“What you're describing sounds like a Bone Walker subterranean. It's building something. Get out of that hospital.”**

The voice was female. The voice was calm. The voice made Margaret believe her for the first time since she'd seen that white fingertip pushing through plasterboard.

The voice had hung up immediately after.

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Ace learned the location and the basics from Margaret Hollis, who had written everything down in a careful hand and was waiting in the hospital's parking lot at midnight when Ace arrived. The meeting lasted four minutes. Margaret showed her the notes. Margaret told her about the knocking, the fingertip, the patients, the patterns of infection. Margaret told her about the cemetery beneath the building, and about the fact that the hospital's maintenance crew had found new bones in the walls—bones that hadn't been there before, bones that seemed to be migrating through the structure from the lowest level upward.

“It's building something,” Margaret said, and she was shaking but her voice was steady. “It's been at this for three months and it's still moving. Still growing. If it reaches the subfloor of the east wing—”

“It will come up,” Ace finished.

“It will come up,” Margaret confirmed.

Ace thanked her and waited until Margaret had driven away before she went to the hospital's main entrance. She didn't try for subtlety—this was the kind of place where showing up confident and moving like you belonged would get her further than trying to sneak. She found a staff badge on a desk in the administrative office, clipped it to her jacket, and headed toward the basement stairs with the bearing of someone who worked here and had every right to be moving downward into the darkest part of the building.

No one stopped her.

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The basement was old.

It was the kind of old that came from a building that had been constructed when basements were still necessary rather than convenient, when they still meant something—storage for the root crops of winter, space where the ground could hold something cold. The temperature dropped as Ace descended. The air changed. The smell of old bone and damp and something else—something metallic and wrong—began to creep into her awareness.

The original foundation was visible here in places where the later additions hadn't sealed it off. Stone. Old stone. The kind of stone that had been laid by hand by people who had been doing it so long it had become second nature. Ace ran her fingers across it once and felt the weight of centuries in its surface.

The Bone Walker's presence was stronger here. She could feel it like a pressure in her bones, like the earth itself had begun to listen to something that was not her.

She heard the knocking before she saw it. The sound of bone on stone, patient and rhythmic, and beneath that sound something else: the rustle of bone moving through stone, the sound of calcified remains being drawn through the foundation like water through limestone.

She found the composite form in the lowest chamber, in what had once been the hospital's coal storage room. It was enormous.

Imagine taking the remains of dozens of human beings—skeletons and fragments and the scattered detritus of what a body leaves behind—and assemble them into a single form, articulated and mobile and wrong in every possible way. Joints where joints should not be. Bones arranged to create movement that human anatomy had never intended. And at the center of it, driving the whole impossible structure, something small and ancient and patient—the original Bone Walker, the animating intelligence, buried in the composite form's chest cavity like a heart.

The structure was six meters tall and still building. As Ace watched, new bones were arriving through the walls—traveling through the foundation stone the way a creature might move through water, drawn by a force that was not gravity and not magnetism but something that had no name in any taxonomy that Ace had ever learned. Ribs. Vertebrae. A femur that glowed faintly white in the darkness. Each new addition was incorporated into the structure with mathematical precision, the composite form adjusting its center of mass, recalibrating its weight distribution.

When the Bone Walker became aware of Ace's presence, the entire structure went still.

The face of it—and the composite did have a face, a collection of skulls clustered at the top of the mass, all oriented downward to look at her—turned. The movement was slow and terrible and absolute.

Then it lunged.

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The space was too low for it to stand. That was the only advantage Ace had, and she used it immediately, dropping flat as the composite form extended upward toward where she'd been standing. The movement of bones came with a sound like a building collapsing, like every piece of death speaking at once, and when the structure crashed down where she'd been, the impact cracked the stone floor.

Ace was already moving.

The composite form was fast despite its size, but it was constrained by the geometry of the space and by the fact that it was built from the remains of many creatures forced into a single pattern. Its limbs could reach but not bend at angles that would be useful. Its body could lurch forward but not with the fluid coordination of something built as one piece rather than assembled from dozens.

Ace had her katanas drawn. She moved into the structure's reach and began to cut.

The bones were hard—harder than bones had any right to be, preserved by whatever force kept the Walker alive animating them—but they were still bones. They could be broken. They could be severed. They could be removed from the structure's pattern, and when they were, the whole began to lose its coherence.

The Bone Walker fought back. Individual bones became weapons, directed by the intelligence at the composite's core with a precision that was almost surgical. Ace took a strike to her left shoulder that would have severed her arm if she hadn't rolled with it, and the impact sent her sprawling across the stone floor. She got up and kept moving. A rib bone caught her ribs on the right side and the breath came out of her in a gasp of pain. She kept moving.

The space was too confined. The fight was a grinding, brutal thing conducted at close quarters, bone against blade, flesh against the accumulated dead. Ace was bleeding from several wounds. Her breath was coming hard. But she kept moving because stopping meant the composite would bury her beneath itself, and the Bone Walker was still alive and still growing and still building, and if she didn't stop it here, it would be in the hospital above her, reaching up through the subfloor, finding the patients in their beds.

She fought toward the center.

The original Bone Walker was small—perhaps the size of a rabbit—but it was protected by layers of accumulated skeleton. Ace cut through them with methodical brutality, severing connections, removing structural support, slowly working her way through the composite's chest cavity toward the tiny intelligence that was driving the entire structure. Every bone she removed made the whole less coordinated, less effective. Every connection she severed was like removing a thread from a tapestry.

Finally, she had a clear path. The original Bone Walker was visible in the center of the cavity—a small, ancient thing, all bone and no flesh, with eyes like dark windows and a patience that had lasted for centuries. It didn't run. It didn't try to escape. It simply looked at her, and Ace felt for a moment the weight of all the years it had been accumulating bones, all the patience it had spent building, all the hunger that drove it to grow and grow and grow.

She put her blade through it.

The composite form shuddered. Every bone in the structure seemed to vibrate at once. And then it collapsed. Not all at once but in a cascading failure, the joints separating, the careful articulation dissolving, the whole impossible assembly coming apart like a structure built by an architect who had forgotten that gravity exists.

Ace was buried briefly in falling bone. She pushed her way out, limbs heavy, breath coming in gasps, the taste of blood in her mouth and the smell of the very old dead filling her lungs. She sat in the rubble for a moment, just breathing, listening to the settling of the remains around her.

The knocking had stopped. The sense of pressure—of something drawing bones through the foundation—was gone. The Bone Walker was dead. The composite form was just skeleton now, just the scattered remains of dozens of human beings returned to the form they'd held before someone had decided to animate them again.

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Above her, through the ceiling and the floors and the structure of the hospital itself, she could hear the night shift going about their work. A monitor beeping. Soft footsteps. The distant sound of a patient coughing. The machines and the quiet and the small human dramas that were playing out in

the lit places above while down here in the dark, Ace sat among the bones of the dead.

She hadn't saved anyone directly. No patient had been rescued. No dramatic moment of prevention right at the edge of catastrophe. The Bone Walker would have reached the subfloor in perhaps three days. That was all. Just three days between the moment Ace entered the basement and the moment the composite form would have breached the floor of the east wing.

She stood up carefully, checking her injuries. The shoulder wound was the worst—deep but clean. The rib strike had hurt more than it had damaged. The others were minor. She would heal. Humans were persistent that way.

She found her way out through the winding basement passages, back to the stairs, back up to the lit floors and the quiet machinery of the hospital. She was careful to avoid the night shift, careful to leave no evidence of her presence. By the time she reached the exit, she was just another person leaving an all-night shift, tired and worn and heading toward sleep.

She drove away from the hospital just as the first light of dawn began to gray the eastern horizon. She did not go back. She did not check on the hospital in the following days. She did not know that by morning, the maintenance crew would find the basement in a state of inexplicable chaos, bones scattered across every surface, nothing to account for it except one more incomprehensible incident at a facility that had accumulated them like a magnet attracts rust.

She did not know that Margaret Hollis would quit her job and never work in a hospital again. She did not know that the east wing would gradually be sealed off and eventually abandoned, too many deaths and too many inexplicable incidents to justify keeping it operational. She did not know that some places, once they've been touched by something that is not quite alive, never quite recover their normalcy.

She only knew that the knocking was gone. The bones had stopped moving through the stone. The foundation was solid again, incapable of being used as a highway for the dead.

She drove south, toward the next place, the next thing waiting beneath the visible world, and the sun rose behind her in colors that had nothing to do with fire or ash or bone, just the ordinary turning of the earth and the light that came with it, persistent and indifferent to all the darkness that moved beneath its surface.

The hospital settled. The foundation held. The dead remained dead, finally, completely, for the first time in a very long while.

[ace, demon-hunt-years](#)

← :demon-hunt-years:episode16 ^ :demon-hunt-years:start ^ :demon-hunt-years:episode18 →

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