

Episode 32 — Name Day

The town of Delphis was unremarkable in almost every measurable way.

Population 247. Founded 1958. Main businesses: agriculture, small-scale lumber, a manufacturing facility that produced components for larger industrial concerns. The kind of place that existed because geography had mandated its existence, because a railroad line had run through here, because water was available and flat land was available and someone had decided that this combination meant a town should be built.

What made Delphis unusual wouldn't have been obvious to a casual observer. But if someone spent an hour in the main street of Delphis, they would notice something was wrong with the language.

People didn't use names. Not personal ones. Not in any context that could be overheard. The diner waitress moved from table to table with a greeting system based entirely on familial relationship: "What can I get for you?" "What'll you have for your husband?" "And your father needs?" Pronouns. Gestures. Carefully constructed references that bypassed any need for an actual human name to be spoken aloud.

The man at the hardware store was referred to as "the owner" or "he there" or "the one who knows about electrical." The woman at the post office was "the woman with the silver hair" or "she there" or "my neighbor." At the school, the principal was "the principal." The teachers were "the one in classroom one" or "that woman" or "my teacher."

It was elegant, in a bleak way. A whole social structure built to accommodate a single taboo, so internalized that the residents no longer seemed to think about it.

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Ace arrived on a Tuesday and made her first mistake within fifteen minutes.

She pulled into the petrol station on the edge of town and asked the attendant, a woman in her seventies wearing a name tag that read MARGARET, if she could provide directions to a person named "David Kellerman." The name had been the only identifying information Ace had been given—a contact reference passed through the usual intermediaries.

The woman's face went white. Actually white. All the blood drained from her features in the space of a few seconds. She gripped Ace's arm with surprising strength.

"Which one did you say?" Her voice was shaking.

Ace, accustomed to the reactions of people dealing with the wrong entities, repeated the name. "David Kellerman."

The woman's grip relaxed. She exhaled slowly, like someone who had just been spared from drowning. "That's a personal name. That's fine. That's fine." But her hands were shaking.

"What's not fine?" Ace asked.

The woman glanced around, then pulled Ace into the back of the station, away from the windows. "We don't use names here. Any names. Not in public. Not out loud. Not where someone might hear." She was speaking rapidly, urgently, like someone trying to warn a visitor about a dangerous dog before the visitor stepped into the yard. "There's a rule. A very old rule. You can't say the names.

Especially you can't say one particular name. If you say the one name, it comes. Three syllables. No language anyone knows. It used to just be that one name that was forbidden, but then we... the habit became not to use any names at all. It's safer. If you don't use names, you can't accidentally say the forbidden one."

Ace understood then. She had been heading into a situation involving a Name Revenant—an entity tied to language, to a specific utterance, to a sound that had been embedded into this town's consciousness so deeply that the residents had restructured their entire social communication system around avoiding it.

"How long has it been here?" Ace asked.

"Since before I was born," the woman said. "My grandmother told me the story. There was a man in town, back in sixty-four, who brought a warning from somewhere. He said there was a name—a specific name—and if anyone said it, something would come. He said it before anyone believed him. He said the name to prove what would happen." The woman's voice dropped. "It took him. Whatever arrived took him, and when it was done, he was gone. Not dead. Not alive. Just... gone from himself. Like his memories had been taken."

"Do you know the name?" Ace asked.

"No," the woman said firmly. "And I'm never going to. None of us are ever going to. That's the whole point."

"But you have it written down somewhere. For new people. For the record."

"We have it written down," the woman admitted. "In a sealed envelope in the town office, with instructions not to open unless the alternative is certain death. But it's not in a language we speak. It's transliterated phonetically, and we've made damn sure none of us read it aloud."

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Ace spent a day learning the language of Delphis's no-names.

She watched how they navigated the world without personal names. A family of four sat at the diner, and they ordered for "my wife," "my son," "my daughter," "my husband." They referred to their dog as "the animal." They gestured. They used relationship descriptors. They built sentences in a way that was actually quite beautiful once you understood the constraint. Instead of isolation, they had developed an intimacy of reference—the way they spoke about each other's roles, their interconnection, made it clear that everyone in Delphis was known in relation to everyone else.

It was a town built on interdependence because the language had made it impossible to address anyone in isolation.

She also learned the history.

Sixty-two years. That's how long the Name Revenant had been here. It had arrived in response to someone speaking its true name, and when it arrived, it unmade the person who had summoned it. Not violently. The man had simply forgotten who he was, who everyone around him was, what his name meant. He had become a blank. The town had found him walking down the main street, not understanding why people were addressing him, not understanding why they seemed upset.

The entity remained. It didn't leave or diminish. It simply existed in Delphis, tied to the utterance of its

name, waiting for someone else to speak it. And in response, the town had reorganized itself.

Sixteen people over sixty-two years had spoken the name, either by accident or by deliberate test or by visiting strangers who didn't understand the rule. Sixteen people had lost themselves. Some had recovered partial memory over time, enough to function, enough to be reintroduced to their lives in pieces. Others had remained blank for the rest of their lives, moving through Delphis as shells, cared for by families who had lost them already.

"Why don't you destroy it?" Ace asked the woman at the petrol station—MARGARET, though she never said the name aloud anymore.

"We can't," Margaret said. "It's tied to the name. The only way to kill a Name Revenant is to bring it to you, and the only way to bring it to you is to speak the name. And once you've spoken it, you're at risk. We've been managing it instead. Teaching everyone the rule. Making sure the rule holds."

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Ace spent the night preparing.

She had fought entities tied to language before. They operated under different rules than physical demons. They were conceptual threats, made of meaning rather than flesh. Her emerald blades could cut meaning as easily as they could cut matter—she had learned that years ago, in a place that had since burned down—but it required precision and speed and the willingness to accept that you were going to take damage from something that didn't have anatomy.

She also knew that once she spoke the name, she had a very narrow window. The entity would respond fast. Faster than anything physical could travel. It would arrive like a syllable reaching the ear, like sound propagating through air. It would give her maybe three minutes before it unmade her the way it had unmade the others.

She needed to be ready the moment she spoke.

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She found the sealed envelope in the town office on Wednesday morning.

The clerk who helped her—a man she never learned the name of, who she referred to in her mind as "the older one" because that's how the town thought about him—retrieved it from a locked cabinet. His hands trembled as he opened it.

He didn't look at the contents. He simply handed it to her, eyes averted.

The envelope contained a single piece of paper. On it, a phonetic transliteration in careful handwriting: *Kex-tori-ash.*

Three syllables, just as described. No language she recognized, though the sound when she pronounced it mentally had an almost-resonance with something from old liturgical texts, with languages that predated modern linguistics. The phonetics looked Sumerian or perhaps Akkadian by construction, but the actual language of origin had been lost or deliberately obscured.

She read it aloud only once, in the office, alone except for the clerk who had positioned himself in the corridor with his hands over his ears.

The name sounded wrong when she said it. Like a word that didn't belong in her mouth, that her vocal cords had no business producing. The sound hung in the air like a syllable that shouldn't have been spoken, that something had been waiting to hear.

Then she waited.

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Four minutes passed. The longest four minutes of her day.

She spent them standing in the office, feeling the wrongness in the air, knowing that something was traveling toward her, that the entity was responding to her call the way it had responded to every other name-speaking in sixty-two years.

When it arrived, it arrived like a door opening onto something that didn't belong.

It came through the wall of the town office without damaging the wall—it simply materialized in the space between two boards, in a gap that shouldn't have been wide enough, in a location that existed as the space between one moment and the next.

It didn't look like a person. It looked like the space between two words. It looked like the syllable Kex-tori-ash given form and intention, given weight and danger. It looked like a linguistic construct that had learned to exist in three dimensions. It had a suggestion of shoulders, a vague silhouette of a head, but the features kept shifting, resolving and unresolved like a word half-understood.

Ace moved.

She was already moving when it fully manifested, her blades raised, her trajectory calculated to intersect with the entity's center mass before it could orient itself toward her. This was the crucial advantage of being the one to summon—she knew where it would arrive, approximately when it would arrive, and she was prepared for that arrival.

The first strike went in clean. Her blade cut through something that seemed to be made of language, that resisted impact like sound resisting silence. The entity shrieked—not a physical sound but something that reverberated in her skull, that made her teeth ache, that felt like a scream arriving from a different dimension.

She followed through with the second blade.

The fight was not like fighting a physical demon. There were no tells, no patterns of attack that she could predict. The entity simply moved, and where it moved, space seemed to warp slightly around it. It struck at her and she felt the impact as a moment of profound confusion—as if a memory of her own was being touched, examined, about to be taken. She retreated and struck again, driving her blades in, working purely on instinct and the knowledge that stopping was erasure.

One and a half minutes.

She felt it—a moment where the entity's focus tightened on her, where something that resembled attention fixed on a memory. She had been twelve years old, in a place that no longer existed, and someone had shown her something important. The memory was just there, intact, and then it was slipping away. She could feel it going, being unmade, being removed from the chain of her consciousness.

She lost it.

She never found out what the memory had contained, what had been shown to her, what had been important enough for the entity to take from her. It was simply gone, a gap in her history, a moment that had existed and now didn't.

She responded to that violation with violence.

Two minutes.

Her blades worked faster now, less controlled but more vicious. She was fighting an entity that was trying to unmake her consciousness, and she was fighting with the understanding that if it succeeded even once more, she would be half-gone, beginning a cascade of losses. She cut at it where it was most solid, at what seemed to be its center, at the place where its form was least ambiguous.

The entity made another attempt. She felt another memory touch, being examined. This one was more recent—from two years ago, a place with mountains. She felt it slip away but held on harder this time, refusing the erasure, accepting the loss while fighting the entity simultaneously.

Two and a half minutes.

“Die,” Ace said, and it was the first word she had spoken in the fight, and it was directed at something that existed as a concept more than as a creature.

The entity resolved, just for a moment, into something almost solid. That's when her blades found what they were looking for—not a vital organ but a conceptual center, the place where the entity's form was tied to its existence as a linguistic phenomenon.

She drove both blades through.

The entity came apart like a word being forgotten. Like language unmaking itself. It didn't scream this time. It simply ceased, and the space it had occupied became ordinary space again, unmarked by its presence.

Ace stood in the town office, breathing hard, aware that she had two gaps in her memory now, aware that she was missing something from two years ago and something from her childhood, aware that the price of this kill was going to be something she would only notice when she reached for those memories and found them gone.

The clerk was looking at her from the hallway, hands still over his ears.

“Is it gone?” he asked, though he already knew the answer. He could feel it gone the way the whole town would feel it gone in minutes—a weight that had been bearing down on Delphis for sixty-two years, suddenly lifted.

Ace didn't answer. She walked out of the town office into the morning light.

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She didn't tell them what she had done.

She didn't explain that the Name Revenant was dead, that the entity that had been tied to the three syllables was unmade, that the rule could now be broken without consequence. She didn't know how the town would take the news. Relief, perhaps. Grief. The strange bereavement of losing something

that had defined your existence for sixty-two years.

The language of Delphis would change now. They could use names again, if they wanted. They could call each other by their true identities instead of building sentences around pronouns and gestures and relationship descriptors. The beautiful constraint that had made them intimate would dissolve.

Whether they would change, Ace had no way to know.

She drove out of Delphis on the road that led east, watching the town recede in her mirror. She was already beginning to feel the absence of the memories that had been taken from her—not actively feeling them, but being aware of their absence, of gaps in the narrative of her own life that she would never fill.

It was the price of the work. Demons took things. Sometimes what they took was a life. Sometimes it was flesh or mind or will. This time it had been memory itself, and she had accepted that trade the moment she chose to speak the name.

Behind her, in Delphis, the residents would slowly become aware that something had changed. The wrongness would lift. The constraint would ease. And they would have to decide, each of them, whether to reclaim the names they had stopped using or to keep building their language around avoidance.

She didn't wait to find out which they chose.

She drove east until the town was off the map, and the road was just a road, and the only sound was the engine of her vehicle and the particular silence that followed violence.—

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Last update: **19/03/2026 11:39**

