

## Episode 6 — Black Snow



### Cold Open

Thomas Kier stood at his back door and watched the snow fall, and it was all wrong.

He'd lived in Millhaven for forty-three years. He knew what snow looked like. He knew how it fell—straight down when it was heavy, drifting sideways when the wind came off the ridge, melting into slush when the temperature rose. He knew the sound it made, the way it smelled, the feeling of it on exposed skin. He was a miner's son and a miner himself. He understood cold.

This snow was different.

It was darker than it should be, more gray than white. The kind of gray you'd see in old ash, or in stone dust, or in places that didn't get enough light. And it didn't fall straight. It moved sideways even when there was no wind, drifting like it had intention, like it was looking for something to land on.

He'd noticed it eleven days ago. Everyone had. At first, people made jokes about climate, about the mining releasing strange air, about the gods punishing Millhaven for some unspecified sin. But it had kept falling, and the jokes had stopped. Now people just went about their business and tried not to think about how the snow didn't look right.

Thomas had tried not to think about how the snow didn't feel right either.

It tingled. That was the word people used when they talked about it in the market, in low voices, when they thought no one was listening. It tingled when it touched exposed skin. Like a gentle electrical hum, barely worth noticing. Barely worth mentioning.

Barely worth changing your life over.

But Thomas had noticed eleven days ago, and his behavior had shifted in small ways. He left work earlier at the mine. He spent more time indoors. He found himself standing at windows, watching the snow, the way it fell, the way it moved. He'd stopped taking the long route home. He wasn't sure when he'd made that decision.

His wife, Margaret, had mentioned it. "You're quieter than usual," she'd said.

He couldn't explain why. He just was.

The tingling had gotten worse over the days. Or maybe not worse—different. First it was just on his hands and face. Then it had moved up his arms, down his neck. Now it was there all the time, a low-level hum in his skin, like standing near a bee hive far enough away that you weren't in danger, but close enough to feel the vibration of all those wings beating at once.

He didn't mention this to Margaret.

Around day six, he'd noticed other people acting differently too. Mrs. Halloway from two houses over had started taking evening walks. In the snow. In the dark, just walking up and down her street, standing sometimes with her face turned up, arms at her sides, like she was listening to something.

Then John Mercer had done the same thing. Then the Alder children.

And tonight, Thomas found himself putting on his coat without really deciding to do so.

He went outside. The snow immediately touched his exposed cheeks, and the tingling intensified into something almost pleasant, almost like warmth, though it was deeply, wrongly cold. He walked up the street. He could see Mrs. Halloway in the distance, standing in her yard with her hands hanging loose at her sides, face up.

They didn't acknowledge each other. There was nothing to acknowledge. This was just what you did now. This was just what was happening.

Thomas found a spot where the snow was falling thickest and stopped. He stood with his arms out, palms up. The snow fell on his face and his neck and his open palms, and the tingling became a hum became something that was almost like music, except music didn't hurt in the way this hurt. It was a good hurt, the kind of hurt that you wanted more of, the kind of hurt that made you want to stand here forever.

He could feel something moving through him. Not painful. Not exactly. Just... moving. Shifting. He imagined tiny things—spores, maybe, or seeds—traveling through his lungs, through his bloodstream, through the machinery of his body. Making him more. Making him part of something larger.

In the morning, he would remember standing in the snow as a dream. He would dress for work and think about the mine, about the darkness of it, about the small points of light the lamp made. He would work through the day and speak to his coworkers in short, measured words. He would be

slower than usual. Calmer. Like someone had turned down the volume on his personality, like someone had dimmed the light behind his eyes.

By the evening, he would stand in the snow again.

This was day eleven. There were forty-three infected in Millhaven now. Soon, there would be more. The snow was still falling. It would keep falling until there was no one left who wasn't standing in the dark, arms open, letting it land on them, letting it in.

### **Ace Arrives**

The snow began to fall as Ace approached the town from the southern road, and she knew immediately that something was wrong.

The color was the first thing. Not white. Not quite gray. A shade that didn't exist in normal snow, a shade that seemed to swallow light instead of reflecting it. The individual flakes were too uniform in size, too geometric, and they moved with a purpose that didn't match the wind.

Ace stopped at the tree line and watched it fall for a long moment. She had learned to trust her instincts absolutely. Her instincts were screaming that this snow was not snow.

She continued forward anyway.

The town was small—maybe five thousand people, concentrated around what looked like a mining or logging operation at its center. Proper roads, proper buildings, the kind of place that had been growing slowly for decades. The streets were mostly empty. Lights burned in windows, but she saw few people outdoors. The ones she did see moved slowly, deliberately, with a lack of urgency that suggested they were sleepwalking while awake.

Ace moved through the main street without being challenged. People looked at her without really seeing her. She was small, compact, easy to ignore if you weren't thinking about your surroundings. Which none of these people were.

She found the tavern and went inside. The man behind the bar looked up, and there was something in his expression that suggested he was pulling himself up from a long way down.

"We're closed," he said.

"You're not," Ace replied.

She sat at the bar and waited. The man struggled for a moment, then seemed to accept the inevitable and poured her water. His hands shook.

"How long?" Ace asked.

"Eleven days."

"Tell me."

The man gripped the edge of the bar. His voice was thin, like he was speaking through pain.

"It came as weather. Just... wrong weather. The snow. It tingles when it touches you. At first we thought we could just ignore it, just dress warmer, just go about our lives." He looked at his hands like they belonged to someone else. "But it's not that simple. The more you're exposed to it, the more..."

affected you become.”

“Affected how?”

“Slower. Quieter. I can feel it in me, and I know it's there, but I can't seem to care like I should. And every night...” He trailed off, staring at nothing. “Every night I want to go out into it. Everyone does. They stand in the snow with their arms open and let it land on them. And I can feel myself wanting to do the same. Soon I will. Tomorrow, maybe. Or tonight.”

Ace listened. She was already thinking about the origin point. Weather didn't come from nowhere. Something had to be generating this. Something had to be the source.

“Where does the snow come from?” she asked.

“The mountain.” The man lifted his hand and pointed vaguely northeast. “There's a place up there. We haven't sent anyone to look, but the snow... it doesn't come from the sky. It comes down the slope. There's a place where it's thicker, where it seems to originate.” He looked at her with something like shame in his eyes. “We know we should do something about it. We know we're infected, that we're spreading it just by existing, just by walking around. But we can't seem to make ourselves care enough to fix it.”

“The infection is progressing,” Ace said. It wasn't a question.

“Yes. It's faster now than it was at the beginning. People turn in a day or two now. At first it took longer. And once they're fully infected...” He didn't finish the sentence.

Ace stood. She had what she needed.

“Rest,” she said to the bartender. “Whatever's going to happen, it will happen regardless. You can't control it.”

She left before he could respond.

## **Into the Mountain**

Ace gathered supplies from her travel pack: a long coat waxed against water, a face covering, goggles to protect her eyes, gloves. The snow was falling steadily, and she was going to have to move up the mountain in it, find the source, and deal with it. Standard hunting, except the hunter could become the hunted if the infection progressed faster than her will.

She could feel the tingling already, even through the protective layers. A faint electrical sensation at the edge of every exposed surface, incredibly subtle. Like the first moment of cold when you first step into winter, before your body registers it fully.

The town's edge led into forest, and the forest led up the slope. There was a path of sorts—more a place where the ground had been beaten down by footsteps over years than an actual trail. Ace followed it, moving upward into the snow that was falling thicker the higher she got.

The tingling increased.

It wasn't painful. That was the dangerous part. It would be easier to resist if it hurt. Instead, it felt like her skin was slowly waking up after being asleep, like thousands of tiny points of light were being activated under her surface. It felt good. It felt like belonging.

She kept moving.

The forest thinned as she climbed. Trees became sparse, individual, the kind of hearty specimens that could survive this high up. The wind picked up. The snow was falling harder, more aggressively, and Ace realized that the snow here was denser than it had been in the town. It was almost like traveling through a dust storm, except the dust was cold and had intention.

She tied the face covering tighter and kept climbing.

An hour in, her limbs were heavier than they should be. Not painful, just slow. It would be easy to sit down, to let the snow cover her, to stop fighting. She could feel that impulse growing. The tingling had moved from her skin to her muscles, from her muscles to her bones. It felt like being slowly filled with something.

She forced herself to move faster. One foot in front of the other. Breath in, breath out. Push through.

The air was getting weird—not just cold, but thick, like she was breathing through cloth. Each breath felt like she was pulling something in, something that wasn't quite air. The tingling was in her lungs now.

And then the world opened up.

The path led her to a clearing that shouldn't exist this high up. The vegetation here was wrong—twisted shrubs and pale plants that looked like they'd been bleached of color, growing in patterns that suggested something artificial about their arrangement. And at the center of the clearing, there was a rupture.

It wasn't large—maybe six feet across, a split in the earth that went down into darkness. And from it, the snow was pouring out.

Not falling. Pouring. Like it was being expelled from somewhere, pushed up and out and into the sky, where it immediately began to spread and drift. The snow that came from the rupture was denser, more actively dark, more aggressively intentional than the snow at the town. This was the source. This was where the infection originated.

Ace approached it slowly. The tingling was almost overwhelming now. She could feel it in her blood, in her bones, in the spaces between her cells. It would be so easy to just lie down here. The snow would cover her. It would fill her. She could become part of it, and then she could go back to the town and help spread it more efficiently, help it reach every person, every corner, every dark space.

She drew her katanas instead.

The rupture was anchored by stone—a visible lip of rock that framed the opening. Ace set her hands against it and felt it shaking, felt something underneath pulsing. The source wasn't just the rupture. The source was whatever was inside, whatever was sending the infection upward.

She took a deep breath that felt like inhaling static, and she jumped down.

## **The Hunt Begins**

The darkness inside the rupture was absolute. Ace pulled out the lamp she'd carried from the town and lit it. The flame caught, burned weakly in the thick air, and illuminated something that shouldn't exist.

The tunnel extended down and forward into the mountain, and it was coated—walls, ceiling, floor—in something that looked like fungal growth. Not quite mold, not quite mushroom, something in between. It pulsed slightly, rhythmically, in time with something Ace couldn't identify but could feel. The infection. The source. The thing that was converting the snow into a vector for spread.

The tingling was intense now. Her vision was starting to fuzzy at the edges. She could feel her thoughts slowing down, becoming easier, becoming less important. It would be so easy to just stop here. To sit down and let the infection finish its work.

She forced herself to move forward.

The passage went deeper. The growth got thicker. She could see now where the snow was being generated—there were nodules in the fungal growth, like fruit growing on a vine, and they were rupturing periodically, releasing small clouds of spores that drifted upward toward the surface. Millions of them. Billions, maybe. All of them carrying the same imperative: spread, infect, convert.

The air was impossible to breathe. Each intake was a battle. Her lungs felt like they were being colonized, filled with something that wasn't air and wasn't quite solid. She kept moving.

The passage opened into a chamber, and there it was.

The core was a mass of the fungal growth, pulsing and heaving like a living heart. It covered the ceiling and walls and floor of the chamber, and at its center, there was something white and writhing. Roots, maybe, or tendrils, or the corrupted remnants of something that had been absorbed and converted into fuel for the infection.

The snow was being generated here, pumped out into the air through a network of passages. The rupture had opened a direct route. The mountain had split, and in that split, something had found a way to thrive. Something that saw the human settlement above as a resource, as a vector, as a way to expand its reach.

Ace's hand was steady on her katana, even as her mind felt fuzzy and distant. The infection wanted her to stop. Wanted her to lie down. Wanted her to become part of the growth, part of the expansion.

She brought her blade down in a controlled arc at the center of the mass.

The effect was immediate. The growth convulsed, and a sound emerged—not quite a scream, not quite an electronic howl—that made her teeth ache and her vision swim. The infection reacted. The spore clouds got thicker, the pulsing faster, the tendrils at the core more agitated.

Ace moved back to the entrance of the chamber. She wasn't going to kill this thing with a blade. But she could burn it. Fire would work. Fire always worked.

She pulled out the flint and tinder from her pack with hands that were almost numb now. The infection had reached deep. She could feel it in her fingertips, in the base of her skull, in the spaces around her heart. Soon—maybe minutes, maybe seconds—the infection would be complete enough that she wouldn't be able to function, wouldn't be able to think, would just become another vector for spread.

The first spark caught. She fed the tinder carefully, patiently, even as her vision continued to blur. The flame grew. She fed it cloth soaked in oil from the tavern. Fed it kindling. Fed it until she had a real fire, hot and bright and pure.

Then she carried it into the fungal mass.

The growth retreated from the fire like it was alive, like it could feel fear. Maybe it could. It burned hot and fast, consuming the organic matter, feeding on what nourished the infection. The tendrils at the core screamed again, and more spore clouds erupted, and Ace forced herself to breathe through the growing darkness at the edges of her vision.

She had to get out.

She turned and walked back through the passage, following the flame of the fire that was now spreading through the fungal growth. Behind her, the entire structure was beginning to collapse. The growth that had anchored the stone was burning, and without it, the stone was shifting, settling.

Her legs didn't want to move. The infection was deep now. She was operating on pure will, on the part of her brain that had learned to survive by moving forward regardless of what wanted to stop her. She climbed back up the passage, back toward the rupture, back toward the world above.

The ceiling came down behind her. A section of it collapsed, blocking the passage completely. She felt the impact, felt the shock wave of dust and ash and spore clouds. Her lungs seized. She couldn't breathe.

She kept moving.

The rupture was ahead. The snow was falling differently now—not with intention, but with chaos. The snow clouds were diffusing, becoming disorganized. The source was dying. The infection was losing its structure, its purpose, its power to command.

Ace pulled herself up and out of the rupture and collapsed in the snow.

## **Resolution**

She lay there for a long time. She couldn't move. The infection was complete now, or nearly so. Her vision was unfocused. Her thoughts came slowly, sluggishly, like moving through water.

She could just stay here. Let the snow fall on her. Let the infection finish its work. It would be peaceful, in the end. Easy. Simple.

But the snow was stopping. She could feel that. The clouds were clearing. The infection was weakening because its source was burning, collapsing, dying in the depths of the mountain.

Ace forced herself to move. One arm. Then the other. She rolled to her side. The world spun.

She stood anyway.

Walking was difficult. Her coordination was off, her balance compromised. But she put one foot in front of the other and began the descent, moving back toward the town. It would take her an hour at this pace. Maybe two. She had time. The fire was still burning beneath the mountain. The infection was dying. She needed to reach the town before it was completely dead, needed to destroy the heavily infected before they could seed new infection, spread new spores.

Needed to burn them out, the same way she'd burned the source.

It was harder than the climb up. Every step felt like it was taking all her will, all her remaining consciousness. The tingling had turned into something else now—a disconnection, a feeling of being

not quite present in her own body. She was watching herself walk, watching her hands move, watching her legs carry her down the slope.

The forest appeared below. The town appeared beyond it. She was still moving. Still functional enough.

The infection could still progress. She had maybe hours before her motor control failed completely, before the infection's purpose shifted from coexistence to something more assertive. She had to move faster.

She forced her body into something almost like running.

## **The Burning**

Thomas Kier was standing in his yard when Ace staggered into town, covered in snow and ash and the dark residue of the dying source.

He looked at her without recognition. His eyes were mostly empty now. The infection had taken root. He would spread it to anyone he touched, anyone who breathed his breath. He was a vector, nothing more.

Ace didn't hesitate.

She moved past him toward the center of town and began to work. She found oil and kindling and cloth. She found wooden structures and spaces where the most heavily infected had gathered. She built fires in a methodical pattern, the same pattern she'd used in the Burned Village. A sequence of ignition points that would create a chain reaction, a controlled burn that would consume the most dangerous source of infection while leaving the outer structures intact.

People tried to stop her. The infected ones moved with their slow, terrible inevitability toward the flames, trying to stop her from spreading the fire. Ace moved around them, used their own bodies as obstacles, forced them away from the work.

One of them—a woman who might have been a baker, by her appearance—grabbed Ace's arm. The touch was cold, was wrong, was desperately focused. Ace could feel the infection trying to transfer, trying to find new vectors through the contact.

She broke the woman's grip, not gently, and used fire to drive her away.

The fires caught. They spread, following the pattern Ace had created, creating a wall of flame that burned through the infected areas, that destroyed the nodules still growing in the bodies of those too far gone to recover. The smoke was thick and terrible, and it carried with it the smell of burnt flesh and burnt infection.

Some of the infected died in the flames. Others broke free and ran deeper into the town, spreading what infection they still carried before the heat could kill the spores in their bodies. Some of the uninfected or only lightly infected didn't make it. Collateral damage. Necessity.

Ace kept working until the flames were out of control, until she could no longer guide them, until the infection in the structures was burned down to almost nothing. Then she stepped back and let the fire finish its work.

## **Aftermath**

The mountain continued to burn for three days. The source was deep, was thorough in its infection of the stone and soil, and it took time for the fire to consume completely. By the end, the rupture had collapsed inward, sealing itself with ash and stone.

The snow stopped falling on the second day. The clouds that had carried the spores dissipated. The air began to clear.

In the town, people began to die—those who were too heavily infected to survive the burns and the smoke inhalation, those whose lungs were too full of spore material to continue breathing properly. Others survived, slowly beginning to think clearly again as the infection died in their bloodstreams and was expelled from their bodies.

The recovery would take time. Some of them would never fully recover from the cognitive damage of eleven days of infection. Some of them would remember standing in the dark snow and experience new nightmares because of it.

Thomas Kier died four hours after the fires began, his lungs giving out, his body too compromised by the infection to survive what had become necessary. The bartender survived, slowly regaining the ability to feel shame about what had happened, what he'd allowed to happen.

Ace spent one night in the tavern, using it as shelter while her own body recovered from the infection. She could feel it in her still—a low-level presence, a background noise in her bloodstream and her cells. She would carry some of it forever. Her body would spend the rest of her life fighting the remnants, and someday, the fight might not be winnable. But not today. Today, she was still functional, still mobile, still capable.

She left in the morning, before the full sun rose, before people could ask her questions she didn't want to answer or offer gratitude she didn't want to receive.

The snow was gone. The rupture was sealed. The infection was dying, and in a few days or weeks, it would be dead entirely. The town would recover, would rebuild, would eventually forget how close they'd come to being completely converted into vehicles for something else's reproduction.

The mountain loomed white and clean against the pale sky, beautiful in its emptiness, indifferent to what it had contained, indifferent to what had been burned in its depths.

Ace was already on the road north when the first clean snow of the season began to fall—normal snow, white and clean and carrying no intention except to fall and become winter.

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