

Episode 16 — The Burned Preacher



The tent revival had been operating for eight months, moving from town to town like a circuit-riding church from a century past, except the preacher at its center had been burned and somehow not died, and that fact had become the faith itself.

Sarah Chen had been attending services for three weeks. She came the first time out of curiosity—the revival had drawn a crowd of five hundred to the field outside Millbrook, and Sarah had never seen her town turn out for anything except the county fair and the high school's homecoming game. But this was different. The air around the tent had a weight to it. The crowd moved like cells in a body, all flowing in the same direction, all pulling toward the center.

The preacher's name was Elias Reeves, and he was burned.

Not scarred. The scars were there, certainly—patches of skin that had been replaced by new skin, paler and tighter, running down one side of his face and disappearing beneath the collar of his white linen shirt. But burned. The fire that had taken thirty-seven lives eight months ago had taken him through the flames and somehow delivered him back to the other side intact enough to stand, to speak, to raise his hands in benediction while his congregation wept.

It was the tears that had brought Sarah back. Not Elias's tears—he didn't seem capable of those

anymore—but the tears of the people around her. She had watched a man in the row ahead of her weep with such intensity that his whole body shook, and she had thought: *Something is wrong with this place.*

But she had come back anyway.

Tonight was a Wednesday service, a small gathering of maybe a hundred people, mostly the core believers. Sarah sat near the back, her coat folded in her lap, watching the preacher move through the space beneath the canvas.

The tent had been rebuilt—the old one destroyed in the fire, the new one a twin that was somehow never quite as bright as it should be. The lanterns they used for light were old-fashioned oil lanterns, the kind that threw dancing shadows across the canvas walls. The shadows seemed to move independently of the light sources, stretching and shortening in ways that suggested a geometry Sarah couldn't quite follow.

Elias stood in the center, his hands open at his sides, his eyes closed. He was speaking about resurrection. About the miracle of survival. About what it meant to be drawn back from the edge of death by the hand of God. His voice was beautiful—deep and resonant—and as he spoke, the lantern flames began to flare, brightening without any visible cause.

Sarah watched the flames. They were orienting toward him, she realized. All of them, even the ones that should have been moving in the other direction based on any natural air current in the tent. They were turning like flowers toward the sun, and Elias was the sun.

She watched his face. In the moments between thoughts, when he was pulling his next sentence up from whatever repository his mind drew from, his expression flattened. Not the natural looseness of someone thinking—the actual erasure of emotion, as though someone had come from behind him and turned a dial that adjusted the setting of his features from *alive* to *present*. Then the thought arrived and his expression reassembled itself, animation returning like a light switching on.

It happened three times during the sermon. Each time, Sarah felt something in her chest tighten.

After the service ended and the congregation was filing out—people moving slowly, reluctant to leave the tent's strange gravity—Sarah saw the preacher at the tent flap, shaking hands, receiving the touch of the faithful. She saw him smile. She saw his eyes look up toward the canvas ceiling and for a moment she thought she saw something behind them that was not Elias. Something vast and burning.

She drove home in silence and did not come back to the next service.

But she told her sister about what she'd seen. Her sister told her friend. Her friend called the county health office, which was where the stories began to connect with other stories, other fires, other towns where the revival had passed through and left small unexplained blazes in its wake.

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Ace received the information in fragments: a pattern of fires across three states, all following the same route as a traveling tent revival. All minor—a trash fire, a car on the road, a playhouse—but all present. All unnecessary. All markers of something that was feeding on a specific resource and leaving scorches in the process.

An Ash Wraith didn't make fires unless it needed to. Fire was its fuel, its connection to the world, the

medium through which it could persist. If something was burning without tactical purpose, it was because the Wraith was burning through its fuel faster than it should be. Which meant it was hungry.

She drove to the revival's current location as evening fell. The field outside the town of Garfield was flat and open, a space that someone had rented for revival season. The tent was enormous—the main revival tent perhaps fifty meters long—with smaller tents around it for the believers who had decided to stay longer, to be closer to the preacher, to bask in the miraculousness of Elias Reeves.

Ace paid cash for entry and found a seat in the back.

The tent filled as the sun settled. The crowd was larger than what Sarah Chen had described for the Wednesday service—perhaps four hundred, the full congregation of believers. They moved with a unified purpose, all finding their seats, all facing the center, all waiting for the preacher to appear.

When Elias came out, Ace felt it immediately: the distortion of heat around him, subtle but unmistakable. The way the light seemed to refract when he moved. The way the air in the tent seemed to lean toward him, drawn by gravity that had nothing to do with physics.

An Ash Wraith. Definitely.

She watched him speak. His voice was indeed beautiful, and she could understand the pull of it, the way it made people lean forward in their seats, the way his words seemed to answer questions they hadn't asked yet. He spoke about survival and grace and the miraculous nature of the second chance. He spoke about being chosen. About being marked. About the way suffering could be transformed into wisdom if you had the faith to let it burn away everything that wasn't essential.

And as he spoke, Ace watched for the glitches. She watched for the moments when the thing inside him became visible. She didn't have to wait long.

In the middle of a sentence about the nature of resurrection, Elias's expression blanked. For perhaps three seconds, his face was a mask—no emotion, no animation, just the blankness of a puppet whose puppeteer had momentarily forgotten to work the strings. Then the light came back behind his eyes and he continued speaking as though nothing had happened. The congregation, watching him, seemed to interpret this as a moment of spiritual intensity. A few people closed their eyes. A few reached toward him, though they were too far away to touch.

Ace saw it clearly. It wasn't a glitch. It was Elias surfacing. It was the man beneath the Wraith, briefly breaking through before being suppressed again.

She needed to get him alone.

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After the service, the congregation lingered. Elias stood at the center of the tent, receiving the faithful, accepting their touch, their prayers, their gratitude. Ace waited until the crowds had begun to thin, then approached.

The moment she was within a meter of him, she felt the Wraith's awareness spike. It knew what she was. The heat distortion around him intensified, flaring like fire responding to a sudden draft.

“Preacher,” Ace said quietly. She didn't raise her voice. No one else needed to hear this.

Elias turned his attention toward her. Up close, she could see the burn scars more clearly—the way

the new skin was almost translucent in places, the network of capillaries beneath it more visible than they should be, as though fire had burned away the normal filters and left only the burning visible. She could see his eyes, and behind those eyes she could see the thing that was riding him, vast and empty, watching her from a space that was not quite inside his skull.

“Sister,” Elias said, his voice still beautiful, but now she could hear the strain beneath it. “You're troubled. I can feel it.”

Ace looked at him without speaking for several seconds. Then she said, quietly: “You're not choosing this. You're being chosen.”

The effect was immediate. Something behind Elias's eyes flinched. The Wraith tried to suppress the reaction but it was too late. For a moment, the man broke through. His face reorganized itself—confusion, grief, a desperate gratitude that someone had finally seen him—and he said, very quietly, so quietly that the people still lingering in the tent couldn't possibly hear:

“Please.”

Then the Wraith pulled him back down and his face became the preacher's again. His hand reached out and touched her arm gently, a gesture of benediction, and she felt the heat of it like touching something that had been resting in direct sunlight.

“Come to tomorrow's service,” Elias said. “Bring your doubts. We'll burn them away together.”

Ace withdrew her arm. She didn't speak. She turned and walked out of the tent into the cool evening air.

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She worked through the night.

The revival's setup included a maintenance tent where equipment was stored. Ace found what she needed: the water connection for the field's irrigation system, the rigging points where the tent's frame was anchored, and the certainty that she could turn a simple irrigation setup into something far more immediate.

She ran hoses from the main water line up into the tent's support structure, positioned sprinkler heads at intervals above the center of the space where the preacher would stand. It took her three hours and the work was careful, precise, invisible. By the time she was finished, the only sign of her interference was a subtle network of tubing that most people wouldn't notice unless they were specifically looking for it.

By midday, the tent was full again. Two services on Thursday—an afternoon service for people who couldn't make evening events, and the main service at dusk. Elias was moving more slowly today, she noticed. The strain of carrying the Wraith was visible in his posture. The burn scars seemed to be spreading, or perhaps the light beneath them was intensifying. He was running out of time.

Ace sat in the front row for the afternoon service. When Elias had spoken for perhaps ten minutes, when the congregation was fully settled and focused and the Wraith was at its most confident, she activated the system.

The water came down like rain.

The sprinklers had been positioned to soak the center of the tent, and Ace had positioned them specifically to ensure that Elias received the full force. The preacher gasped as the water hit him—cold and sudden and complete—and the congregation erupted into confused motion. People stood. People shouted. Some thought the tent was somehow flooding. Some thought this was the work of heaven, water pouring down like a second baptism.

The Ash Wraith's connection to fire was not metaphorical. It was literal and physical and immediate. Water disrupted it.

The Wraith tore free from Elias like something being pulled out of a hole. The man collapsed to the ground, gasping, and the Wraith rose above him as a storm of ash and heat and burning wind that was far too large to have ever fit inside a human body. It was massive—the size of a room, the size of a god—and it was enraged.

Ace moved.

She had her katanas drawn as she ran toward the center, closing the distance between herself and the thing that was now fully expressed, no longer bound by a vessel's dimensions. The crowd was panicking now, people running for the tent flaps, people screaming. The Wraith's attention was partly on Ace and partly on trying to reestablish its connection to Elias, to get back inside before the intrusion of water could strip away all the anchors that tied it to this world.

Ace didn't let it redirect. She moved into the fire.

The heat was extraordinary. It burned across her skin and set her nerves screaming. She felt her arm blister where a tendril of burning ash caught her, felt the hair on her head singe and crisp. But she was moving with purpose and her blades were moving with her. She was fighting something that didn't have a physical body in the traditional sense, but fire still had patterns, had weak points, had places where the animating intelligence was concentrated more heavily than others.

She cut at those points.

The Wraith shrieked—a sound like wind through burning buildings—and the water continued to fall, the tent growing soaked, the temperature of the air beginning to drop as the sheer volume of water overwhelmed the thing's ability to sustain itself. Its form began to dissipate. Its substance began to diffuse. It was still dangerous—a scattering consciousness expressed as fire was still capable of causing damage—but it was no longer concentrated enough to fight back effectively.

Ace completed the process with clinical precision, her blades tracing patterns through the heat and ash until the Wraith was not one coherent thing but a thousand incoherent fragments, each one burning its last before being extinguished by the water that continued to fall and fall and fall.

In the end, it was just rain and ash and the smell of something that had been burning and was now burning no longer.

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Elias was still breathing.

Ace found him on his back in the center of the tent, the water still falling on his face, his eyes closed. His burns—the secondary burns that the Wraith had kept in a constant state of external healing—were now raw and exposed. He would need a hospital. He would need serious care.

She called an ambulance from outside the tent, didn't identify herself, spoke only the location and "medical emergency" before hanging up. Then she walked back to where she'd left her vehicle and drove away.

In her rearview mirror, she could see the tent still standing, still large, still beautiful in its way. The congregation was gathering in confused knots around it, unsure what had happened. Some of them would stay with Elias. Some of them would drift away to other revivals, other preachers, other miracles. They would find their own way forward.

Elias would have four months or forty years. Ace didn't know which. The damage the Wraith had done to him—burning him from the inside out—wasn't something she could heal. But she had given him the possibility of choosing what came next. She had given him back to himself.

That would have to be enough.

She drove until the town was fully behind her, then pulled over to a gas station where she could see the stars, and sat for a while with her burned arm resting on the steering wheel, watching the sky and listening to nothing at all.

The revival had moved on by morning. The tents came down. The equipment was loaded into trucks. The congregation scattered like seeds. By the time the local authorities thought to investigate the tent—responding to reports of water and fire and screaming—the only thing left was crushed grass and the smell of ash, which could have been from anything, really. Could have been an old fire pit. Could have been a barbecue. Could have been the natural exhalation of a place that had briefly been something other than itself.

The hospital admitted Elias Reeves as a patient with severe thermal injuries of unknown origin. The doctors couldn't explain how he was alive. They couldn't explain how his burns had achieved the pattern they had achieved. They could only treat him and hope, and he could only lie in the hospital bed and know, with absolute clarity, that the weight that had been sitting on his chest for eight months was finally, finally gone.

He wept for the first time since the fire. The nurses thought it was pain. They brought him more pain medication. He accepted it, but he didn't take it. He only cried, grateful, broken, and finally—finally—himself.

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