

Episode 5 — Ashes That Remember



Cold Open

The boy was seventeen and stupid in the way seventeen-year-olds often are. His name was Garrett, and he'd been dared by his friends to go into the Burned Village, touch one of the black stones, and come back. The dares had been getting progressively more elaborate. Last month it was steal something from the market. Before that, swim across the river in winter. His friends thought the Burned Village was just ruins. Forgotten history. Nothing dangerous.

He'd been walking for thirty minutes through mist-thick forest when the stones began.

At first, just one—a blackened foundation corner jutting through the brown, matted undergrowth. Then more. Fragments. Twisted metal that had once been tools or hinges. The ground darkened. The smell hit him second: old char, deep and sour, mixed with something that reminded him of burnt meat even though that didn't make sense. The village had burned when his grandfather was a boy. Nothing fresh here. Nothing alive.

The mist clung closer as the ruins thickened around him. Walls. Whole walls, sometimes, just shells—two or three stones high before they crumbled. Doorways that led into nothing. Garrett walked slowly now, reading the landscape the way it wanted to be read: this was a place that had suffered.

He could feel it in the quiet. The birds didn't sing here. There were no insects. Just the sound of his breathing and his boots on the ash-colored ground.

He found a wall that was still nearly intact—maybe five feet high—and touched it with his palm. The stone was cold. So cold it hurt. He jerked his hand back, but not before something... flickered.

There was a woman standing in front of him.

Not standing, exactly. Hovering. She was made of something gray and thin like smoke, but solid enough to cast no shadow. Her dress was from another era—layers of it, burnt at the edges. Her face was twisted. Mouth open. She was reaching.

Garrett screamed and staggered backward.

The woman's head turned to follow him with a sound like ash shifting in a wind that didn't exist. Her fingers, long and wrong, stretched toward him. Toward his face.

He ran.

He didn't remember the path back. He must have taken it anyway, because he stumbled out of the mist-line and into the forest where the trees were normal and the birds sang. He kept running. Running until he hit the village perimeter, until his legs gave out and he fell into the dirt road, gasping.

By the time people found him, he was lying there, eyes open, blank as a doll's.

They called a doctor. The doctor said his heart was fine. His lungs were fine. All of him was fine.

He just wouldn't speak. Wouldn't move unless led. Wouldn't eat unless fed. His eyes tracked light, but there was nothing behind them. The boy Garrett was still alive. But Garrett was gone.

Ace Arrives

The settlement was small—fewer than two hundred people, the kind of place that barely existed on maps. Ace approached it from the eastern path at dusk, moving through the last stretch of woods without hurrying. She was alone. She was always alone.

The first person she passed was an old woman drawing water from a well. The woman's hands shook. She looked up, saw Ace, and something shifted in her expression—recognition, maybe. Fear, certainly.

“You're the hunter.”

Ace said nothing. She kept walking toward the center of the settlement, where light was better and voices came from.

The tavern keeper was a broad man with intelligent eyes. He saw her come through the door and immediately set down the glass he was cleaning.

“You heard, then.”

“Heard nothing,” Ace said. Her voice was quiet, unused. “I was told there was something here that needed killing.”

The keeper nodded like this made sense. Perhaps it did. Someone, somewhere, had sent word. Someone who knew her name, or at least where to find her. It didn't matter. The message had reached her—there was something in the Burned Village that was taking people's minds. That was enough.

“The boy's name was Garrett. He went there five days ago. When we found him, he was...” The keeper paused, searching for a word. “Empty.”

“Show me.”

They walked to a cottage at the settlement's edge. The boy lay on a bed in a room that smelled of lavender and fear. He was alive—his chest rose and fell—but his eyes didn't move when Ace approached. She studied him carefully. The skin around his eyes was pale, paler than it should be, as though something had been drawn out through the sockets. His hands were cold when she touched them. Not dying-cold. Absent-cold. The cold of a place no one lived in anymore.

“What did he say about it?” Ace asked.

“Nothing. He won't speak.”

“Before. What did he say before he left?”

The keeper rubbed his face. “He was going on a dare. To the ruins. To touch a stone and come back. Children's games.” The man's voice was hollow with the guilt of it. “He came back. Just... not all of him.”

Ace walked to the window. The Burned Village lay roughly north, about an hour's walk into the valley. The mist was heavier there, she could see it from here—a gray haze that didn't belong to the normal weather. She had seen many things in her years of hunting. She had not seen that kind of haze before.

She turned back to face the keeper.

“No one else goes there.”

It wasn't a question. The keeper understood anyway.

“We all know better. After Garrett...” He trailed off. Then: “There's been nothing like him before. Not until a week ago. We thought it was just ruin. Just old stone.”

“It's something,” Ace said. “I'll go in the morning.”

“It's not safe,” the keeper said, as though she might not have understood.

Ace moved past him toward the door. “Nothing is safe. That's not relevant.”

She found shelter in a barn on the settlement's edge, a clean space that smelled of hay and old leather. She lay on her back and stared at the darkness and thought about cold hands and empty eyes. Sleep came easy. Ace had trained herself to sleep like a machine: deep, fast, complete. She would need to be sharp in the morning.

The Burned Village would be waiting. And whatever had taken the boy's mind was waiting there with it.

Into the Ruins

The morning was clear and cold. Mist hung in the valley, but it was normal mist—wet, light-gray, the kind that comes with autumn cold. Ace moved through it without hesitation, following the path that led down into the valley and toward the blackened stones.

She had her katanas. She had rope and flint and a lamp she'd carried from the settlement. She had water and dried meat. She had, most importantly, the ability to move fast and see clearly when everything else was obscured.

The ruins appeared first as shapes. Then as forms. Then as what they were: the remains of a village that had burned hard enough to char everything down to the stone foundations and fragments.

Ace moved through them slowly, reading the layout. A main path, long overgrown. Buildings on either side—she could read their footprints in the scorched earth. The fire had been hot. The stone was black-dark, and where the mist settled on it, the moisture ran off like oil, beading and streaming. Unnatural.

She picked her way deeper, moving toward the center of the settlement. The smell got stronger—char and old meat and something underneath it all, something that made her teeth ache when she breathed deep.

It was there that she first saw one.

The figure stood in what had once been a doorway. It was made of ash and shadow, an outline in the shape of a human, but wrong in ways she couldn't immediately name. It was perfectly still, facing away from her, toward the deeper ruins. It didn't move when she approached.

Ace drew one of her katanas. The blade came free with a sharp, clean sound.

The revenant's head turned.

There was no neck motion, no natural twist. The head just rotated, like something on a pivot. When it faced her, she saw that it had no features—just a gray, smooth surface that suggested a face the way a child's drawing might. The mouth opened anyway, and ash fell from it like snow.

It moved toward her fast.

Ace sidestepped and brought the katana down in a controlled arc at its shoulder. The blade passed through without resistance, as though she'd swung at smoke. The revenant didn't slow. It kept coming, reaching with fingers that were too long and too thin, fingers that trailed ash like they were leaving a memory of themselves with each gesture.

She dodged left, rolled, came up moving backward. The revenant didn't pursue immediately—it seemed to forget her after she moved out of its immediate path. It turned back toward the ruins and stood motionless again, as though it was waiting for something. As though it had already forgotten her entirely.

Ace breathing was even. Her heart was steady. The blade hadn't worked. That was information. She filed it away.

She continued deeper into the ruins, moving more slowly now, watching for the shapes. There were more of them—she counted four in the central plaza, just standing among the blackened stones. They

didn't react to her passage. They seemed locked in their own moment, their own terrible loop of whatever they were reliving.

But one of them, a figure in the ruins of what might have been the settlement's main building, turned to look at her as she passed.

It took a step toward her.

Ace moved away quickly, not running but moving with purpose. The revenant followed, and as it moved, it seemed to awaken the others. The standing figures stirred. They all turned toward her. They all began, slowly, to move in her direction.

She broke into a run toward the edge of the ruins. Behind her, she could hear the sound of ash shifting, the dry whisper of them pursuing. They were fast but not faster than she was. She made the tree line, and the figures stopped at the boundary of the ruins, as though they couldn't leave the blackened ground. As though they were anchored to this place.

Ace stopped about thirty yards into the forest and watched them. They stood in a line at the edge of the ruins, swaying slightly, reaching toward her with those terrible hands but unable to move further. Waiting.

They were bound to the ruins. That was the key.

She turned and walked back toward the settlement, already planning. The revenants were made of ash and old memory. They couldn't be cut. But they could burn. And if the ruins burned, if she burned the structure and the stone that was anchoring them here, the ash would scatter. The loop would break.

It would take time. It would take fire. And she would have to do it while they tried to stop her.

She had faced worse.

The Hunt Begins

Ace gathered what she needed from the settlement. Kindling, cloth, oil from the tavern keeper's lamps. She made no explanations. The keeper didn't ask for them.

She returned to the ruins in the afternoon, when the mist was thinning slightly and visibility was better. She moved to the eastern edge of the settlement, where the fire damage seemed most severe and the structural elements were most exposed.

She chose a foundation stone—a massive black block that had once anchored a wall. She laid kindling against it, soaked cloth in oil, arranged wood in a pattern she'd learned years ago: a structure that would catch, that would burn steady and hot without immediately consuming itself, that would keep burning even as rain threatened.

She lit the first fire.

The revenants came immediately.

They moved faster when she was actively doing something. They emerged from between the ruins like ash given terrible purpose, converging on her position. Ace drew both katanas and moved to meet them.

The first one tried to grab her, and when her blade passed through it without effect, she pivoted, used the momentum to kick it backward. It fell apart slightly, ash scattering, then pulled itself back together. It was slower, reassembling. That was something.

A second revenant came at her from the side. She dodged its reaching hands and moved toward the next fire location. She had planned a sequence—a series of points that, once burning, would create a chain of fire that could spread through the ruins.

The second fire caught quickly. The revenants screamed.

It was a sound like wind through a canyon, like the death-cry of something that had never been alive. Multiple voices at once, all the same pitch, all the same awful anguish. More of them emerged from the deeper ruins, moving toward her.

Ace was breathing hard now. She moved to the third location and began building the fire there. One of the revenants got close enough to graze her arm, and the sensation was like being brushed by liquid nitrogen. Her entire arm went numb. She rolled away, forced feeling back into her fingers by sheer will, and kept working.

The third fire caught.

The revenants were all moving toward her now, all of them abandoning their standing positions. They came in waves—slow, inexorable, reaching. Ace moved between them with brutal precision. She couldn't cut them, but she could use her katanas to keep them off-balance, to knock their terrible hands away. She could move faster than they could think. She could stay ahead of them.

But there were so many of them.

She was at the fourth location when one of them nearly reached her completely. It moved faster than the others, faster than she'd seen any of them move. Its hand closed on her shoulder, and the cold was like being plunged into deep water. Her right arm went slack, useless. Pain sparked in her chest.

She brought the hilt of her left katana up in a quick, vicious strike that caught the revenant's jaw. It fell apart, losing cohesion, scattering. She kicked away from the spot and forced herself to keep moving, forced her right arm to wake up.

The pain faded. Sensation returned. She was still mobile. She kept going.

The fourth fire caught.

The chain was beginning now. The first fire had spread along the wooden frames of the eastern building, and the heat was reaching the foundations. Stone doesn't burn, but the materials around it do—the ancient timbers, the tar-pitch that had sealed them, the organic matter that had accumulated over decades. The temperature was rising. The revenants were getting slower as the fires intensified.

Ace moved to the fifth location. Her breath was controlled, but her heart was racing. She was moving on pure instinct now, on the deep-rooted knowledge of how fire moved through a space, how it could be guided, how it could be made to consume in a specific pattern.

She was making the ruins burn from the outside in. Slowly, methodically, in a way that would catch and hold.

The revenants tried harder. They came faster. Two of them almost trapped her between the growing

fires, driving her toward a wall. She vaulted it, rolled on the other side, came up running. The third fire was spreading faster now, jumping from one structure to another, creating a wall of heat that the revenants couldn't cross. It was slowing them. Breaking their ability to pursue.

The fifth fire caught, and then the sixth.

By the time she was setting the seventh, the ruins were burning actively, visibly. The mist was burning away, and the sky above was turning orange. The revenants were fewer now, and they were moving erratically. Some of them were dissolving entirely, their ash form breaking apart in the heat, scattering on the thermals rising from the flames. Others were retreating deeper into the ruins, back toward the center, as though they were being drawn inward.

Ace set the final fire at the exact center of the settlement, at a massive stone foundation that seemed to be the anchor point for all the rest. She used everything she had left—oil, cloth, all the remaining kindling. She made a fire that would burn hot and long.

Then she stepped back and watched.

The revenants converged one last time. All of them, every remaining figure, moved toward her at once. But the flames between them and her were too intense. The heat drove them back. They reached through it anyway, desperate, their forms flickering in the firelight, reaching toward her with those terrible hands.

One of them made it through.

It was the fast one, the one that had almost killed her. It came at her through the flames, its form barely holding together, trailing ash and screaming that awful, empty scream. Ace moved toward it instead of away, met it at the boundary of the fire. She drove her knee up into its center mass, felt nothing give because there was nothing solid to strike, and used the impact to throw herself backward and away.

The revenant kept moving forward. Into the burning center. Into the foundation-stone and the flames that were beginning to genuinely consume.

It tried to scream again, but the sound cut short. The ash that composed it was dispersing, scattering into the updraft, becoming indistinguishable from the smoke of burning wood and burnt memory.

The others followed. They all walked into the center fire, or they dissolved as the heat reached them, or they simply ceased to exist as the flames consumed the physical remnants that anchored them here. One by one, the gray figures collapsed into ash, and the ash scattered, and the Burned Village burned again like it had burned years before.

Ace stood fifty yards away and watched it happen.

Resolution

The fire burned through the night. Ace didn't leave. She walked the perimeter occasionally, checking that it was spreading in the right direction, that it wasn't jumping toward the living forest. But mostly she sat on a stone at the edge of the ruins and watched the revenants burn.

They came less and less frequently as the night deepened. Toward dawn, she saw the last one—a figure that looked almost solid, almost alive, standing in the flames like it was confused about what was happening. It looked at her for a long moment, and in its blank, ash-smooth face, she thought she

might have seen something like recognition.

Then the structure it was standing on collapsed, and the figure fell into the burning center, and that was that.

By the time the sun was up, the fire was burning itself out. The structural remnants were mostly consumed. What was left were the stone foundations—the hard parts that couldn't burn—arranged like the skeleton of something that had been laid bare by time.

There were no more revenants.

Ace walked through the cooling ruins one more time, reading the space. The ash was still warm under her boots. The smell of burnt wood and old char was thick in the air, but the other smell—the wrongness that had made her teeth ache—was gone. The space felt emptier somehow. Cleaner. Like something that had been rotting had finally been put to rest.

She made her way back toward the settlement around midday. The mist was gone from the valley, burned away by the heat. The forest looked normal again. The birds were singing.

The keeper was waiting at the settlement's edge when she approached. His face was uncertain, like he didn't know whether to be grateful or afraid.

"The Burned Village?" he asked.

"Burned again," Ace said.

She walked past him without stopping. She would collect her things from the barn and leave before evening. There was nothing more to do here.

But before she reached the barn, the keeper called out to her: "The boy. Garrett. Will he—"

Ace didn't turn around. "No."

The keeper was quiet for a moment. Then, quietly, like he was asking something he already knew the answer to: "Because he's already gone."

"Yes."

She kept walking. Behind her, she heard the keeper sit down on the step of his tavern, heard him breathe out like he'd been holding it for days.

Aftermath

Later, in a room that smelled of lavender and old sorrow, the boy called Garrett lay motionless on his bed. His eyes didn't track movement. His lungs continued their mechanical work. His heart continued its unknowing beat.

In the Burned Village, the last of the ash cooled against blackened stone.

The valley was quiet again. It would stay quiet for a long time, until people forgot why they were afraid of the ruins, until a new generation thought the stones were just old and harmless. Until children dared each other to go there again.

But for now, there was nothing in that place but cold memory and the deep, patient quiet of stone

that had learned not to remember.

Ace was gone by sunset. She left no note, no explanation, no sign that she had been there at all except for the burned-down center of what had once been a village and the strange, absolute emptiness that now filled that space.

She was already on the road north when the last smoke of the ruins cooled and faded into the evening air.

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