

### Episode 3: The Archaeologist

Before we get into today's episode, which is part one of a two part episode, the second part coming on August 27th. I'd like to thank everyone who gave us a listen and followed us through our opening week. We greatly appreciate all of you and will do our best to keep you entertained, engaged, and maybe teach you something along the way. While you're here, why don't you follow the @wireland\_ranch twitter account for show notes, updates, and announcements. We post any videos we may release on both youtube and in shorter form over on tik tok and you can just search wireland ranch on either of those platforms. And as always you can join the patreon at [patreon.com/wireland ranch](https://patreon.com/wireland_ranch) where you will receive all the behind the scenes stuff, livestreams, concept art, and extra lore based episodes. We hope to see you there but for now, I think it may be time to introduce our narrator. And as always: we will see you 'round the bend.

Friends, when we started digging, when we started bringing the fresh dirt up from the ground into huge piles of sifted soil, we did not know the series of events we would kick into motion. The devastation to our society that we would jumpstart that would've stayed hidden and buried if we weren't so fucking \*curious.\* But the curse of curiosity is particularly human and it exists as much now as it did back then, thousands of years ago, before the great disaster. The origins of which, I have spent my life searching for. And now, sitting on the cusp of that discovery, that great and ultimately meaningless answer, I wish I could take it all back. But the cat is out of the bag, as they used to say, and there is no way to put it back inside.

We found the first site by accident after a massive and devastating explosion rose from under the earth. The village above was demolished, the homes and buildings that remained were left charred and unlivable, and that didn't matter much cuz the people who lived there were well, no longer alive to live in them. People in surrounding villages began to fall ill and though the symptoms varied, the end result was the same: a horribly painful but thankfully quick death. For a long time after, the rest of our meager civilization avoided the area. Maybe if we'd forgotten about it, if we'd just left well enough alone, we would not currently be where we are. But friends, you know how we do things: we seek and search and pillage and play with the boundaries until those boundaries look like finish lines. But the finish lines always lead to a new race. There are never enough answered questions.

In my youth, the only thoughts I held dear were those of seeking out answers to those questions best left unasked. Had I not had an almost inhuman need to know, our lives would have continued on as normal. Our society would have kept chugging along in a primitive and well intentioned state. But nothing ever stays sacred, and nothing ever stays quiet.

So nearly 20 years to the date of the explosion, I led a small team to the site of the devastation, a small village that was once called Thillia in our tongue, and before that, way back in history, was

called Blythe, California. And I must be honest here: I thought I was doing the world a favor. I thought in the end, that I would be a hero to our people. I thought that if I found answers from the old ones that we would have a brighter future. Never in a million years did I think things would turn out like this. That, because of me, a sect of our people would be worshiping the great and venerable Capital One. Or bending a knee to the goddess Wendy, daughter of Dave.

Because of me, we now sacrifice our loved ones to the unbending will of golden arches. And had I known then, what the old ones did to their heroes, heroism would have held far less stock in my mind. You see, the good men and women of days past, the people who tried to make things better, tried changing things in order to build a more equitable society, they were all killed.

Assassinated, it was called. And if they were not assassinated then something called a smear campaign would make it so they assassinated themselves, or went into hiding, or worse yet, imprisoned in these giant guarded fortresses where the old ones kept their poor people, in most cases, until they were dead or so altered they were less than shadows of their former selves.

Only the terrible succeeded: they were called rich and they lived in grand homes in beautiful places, long since destroyed by an earth that had had just about enough. And if you strolled just outside of their grand mansions and glorious houses on palm tree lined streets, you'd find a hundred people for every one of them that lived in tents or slept on benches and spent their days begging for something called money to stay alive.

So I recruited my team and we made the first trek to the ruins of Thillia. When we arrived, tears began to well in our eyes at the sight of piles of ash littered with the bones of our countrymen, of great mounds of rubble and flattened hovels that once were their homes. Most of my team turned and left then. They could not stomach the scene, and neither could I really, but by then I had spent too much of my time to turn away. I had done too much research and had too many questions that if I did not seek their answers, I may as well have assassinated myself.

So, the remaining people who stuck by my side, all three of them, were instructed to build a camp outside the perimeter and I made the first daring steps into the past, alone.

The village of Thillia was a bustling and beautiful affair in its time. A seat of trade and a popular destination for those who'd recently decided to share their lives with another and abandon the arduous attempt at solitary existence. I believe the old ones called it marriage but their version was marred by bigotry and a strange religion that taught one thing in theory but became another in practice and rewarded those who preached hate far more than those who preached acceptance. From what I can tell, they thought in order for love to be real, it had to be between opposing genders rather than genuine connection. Yet another reason we should've left the past in the past.

Once a year, Thillia had a huge festival that spread well outside the boundaries of the tiny village. To hear the elders tell it, people would come from far and wide to spend a week there celebrating the gift of the gods once known as Soma and now known as illicit. Before I began searching, Soma was the foundation of our spiritual practice. The petals of the angel orchid would be placed in a burner in the center of the room and parishioners would sit silently, breathing deep and slow until every mind melded into one and allowed them to experience the truth of consciousness. The truth of the interconnected spirit that exists within us all. Now though, because of me, Soma is illegal and possession is punishable by death.

The explosion that rocked the earth below Thillia occurred during one of these festivals and as I stepped through the burned and glassy paths once host to happy children and smiling parents, I could see why so much emphasis was placed on this event in my childhood. The festivities meant that the population of the village at the time was almost triple that of normal circumstances. And thus, sent waves of anger and confusion to every corner of our world, changing everything about our lives in ways that were unimaginable before. The old ones had a similar event on a strange September day.

As I approached The town, I could see the gate remained untouched. Bright pastel banners hung above, the words long since weathered away, but welcoming nonetheless. Just above them, right inside, two bodies dangled by their feet, blackened and petrified. Steadily, the ground grew gray as I walked, patches of grass became less frequent until there was no more and the black dirt sounded like breaking glass beneath my feet. And then, the waves of dead. Bones sprawled and piled on top of one another as though they died mid sprint and likely trampled one another as they fled the center of town.

On the main street, inside the gate, I had to move bones aside with my feet to create a path. I moved gently, trying to be as respectful as possible to the dead. Though, when there are that many, death kinda loses its meaning and the bones were more a thing that was in my way rather than hundreds, maybe thousands, of people who'd lost their lives. So I tried to keep that centered in my thoughts as I almost danced through the remains, feet landing where they had a free place to land and bouncing toward the next one. I couldn't help thinking I was doing a funky, and I do mean funky, funeral march through the bone zone.

Lol.

The few buildings that survived, and survived is a loose term in this context, had images painted on the sides. The featureless outline of a man, black with spiraling purple designs fading in and out, and on the face, nothing but two stark white holes where the eyes should be. Years later, after having explored and studied the contents of the buildings beneath, I now know that the same image was found on many of the buildings in Catalhoyuk, largely considered by ancient

historians to be one of the very first human cities on the planet, and potentially the birthplace of Art itself. And friends, I know you are wondering what exactly this means and I will, of course, be happy to tell you. But only when this bit of information is conducive to the narrative and sadly, that time is not now. But we will get to it, I promise.

For now though, you need to know that as I walked through that bone scattered street, all black and grey with ash and filth, those white eyes seemed to fall upon my every step. Peeking around ravaged alleys and the collapsed roofs of destroyed homes. The outlines began waving hazy and mirage like, bending and almost breaking the walls themselves and just as they appeared to gain dimension, to become matter, they would suddenly fall back into flat black paint. Tricks of the light making a fool of my brain.

The street began to crack and crumble beneath my feet as it sloped further down the closer I got to the center of town. And then, there before me, a giant crater. Just this massive hole that broke completely open 300 or so feet from where I stood. The wind blew ash around me in tiny barely formed tornados as it lashed against the walls of the crater. The air smelled of must and mildew.

This section of town seemed free of the bones that littered every other square inch of the ground, the bodies either entirely incinerated in the blast or, time took them down the hole.

I considered turning back and returning with my team, if I was going to spelunk down to god knows what, safety should probably take priority and as I turned on my heels to head back the ground began shaking violently. I jumped backward just a second too late and the ground that had only been cracking moments ago broke entirely beneath my feet and I found myself, eyes locked on the sky above as I fell, kicking and screaming, into the caldera that swallowed Thillia so long ago.

And then friends, I closed my eyes and braced for the end as the air rushed by and sure enough, it came with a crash and the air left my lungs and I? Well friends, I was no more.

Until I was again and my eyes flashed open and the world spun around me as I floated still in the air like the eye of a storm in reverse. Above me, a black shifting form flew toward me from the sky, blotting out the light and trading formlessness for a series of whirling fingers bent in on one another, clasping a contained galaxy of stars and cosmic dust.

I had yet to breathe, just hung there in stasis as this strange space consumed me and became, well, nothing less than everything.

“How is it, being dead? Is it like everything you thought it would be?”

Stars whirled and churned around me.

“Better than nothing.” I replied.

“You may change that opinion in the long run. Amirite???”

“Dunno. It’s not the long run yet.”

“Settle in then. I will be with you after I teabag these motherfuckers, you know how this shit be.”

And at the time, I actually did not know how it be. I had never heard of tea or the bags therein and so, I closed my eyes, said my thanks to the world for having me as a guest, and let it all go.

I could feel myself fall again. And while most of that time was a blur, I remember being surprised I could feel anything at all. I did \*know\* I was dead, had died, lived no more. There was this terrible sound all around me: screams and explosions and gunshots galore but I just fell through it all and unfortunately, never hit the bottom. Everytime the sound of the air rushing by changed spatial context, everytime the pressure prepared me for the surface, for the \*bottom,\* whatever that bottom was, I would feel myself plucked up at thousands of miles an hour. Sort of slapped upwards like being served in some celestial volleyball match. And everytime that happened, a hearty laugh would erupt from the ether and more gunshots, more screams, and still a few explosions.

I do not know how long this went on. Maybe seconds, maybe years. I did not take a breath and my heart did not beat. Though, my brain seemed to function as usual aside from the whole processing fear business. Because I should’ve been fucking terrified but I was not. Just a brave little corpse that could, waiting for the game, set, match.

Or whatever the hell it’s called in volleyball.

I felt that black chiliad fingered hand wrap around my body, tight enough that if I did have breath, It would’ve been gone then, and I was pulled out of the fall/fling cycle and sat gingerly into what felt like a soft and very comfortable chair.

The darkness behind my closed eyes became a bright red light, almost searing my vision and I tried to force them open but

“Nah, not yet homey.” That same laughing voice said, yet now it spoke in a sincere and semi consolatory tone. As though whatever was speaking had had its fun and now just wanted me to listen. “Before we get those peepers open and you are able to see me in my infinitely kick ass glory, I feel I should prepare you, at least a little.”

The red shade toned down to hot pink, to pale pink, and finally, a clean and soothing white that flashed a soft purple every couple of seconds.

“Where am I?” I muttered softly, followed by a panicked “Wait tho, am I dead?”

“Well I mean, what exactly is dead?”

“No more? Ceasing to exist? Shuffled off the mortal coil?”

“Do you feel shuffled off of any mortal coils?”

“No. I don’t suppose so.”

“But yes, you are dead—“

“I fucking knew it.”

“I mean at least for a little while. We are gonna have a little convo and then, we will decide together, you and me, if \*dead\* is a state you’d rather stay in or if you wanna go back to your world as a shining beacon of hope and change. MLK style.”

“MLK style?”

“Yeah, like a preacher dude who has a dream or whatever and then just the worst roads ever named after you. You wanna have some streets named in your honor? Lol.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? Can I open my eyes yet?”

“Almost. I should probably warn you though. What you will see is not anything you’d ever expect to see, not anything anyone should ever really expect to see but you people are so limited in imagination anyway. Can you maybe prepare yourself for that?”

“How do you suppose I do that?”

“Well, let’s see...” I heard a shoe tapping echo. It sounded as if a giant ball was bouncing frantically in an echo chamber. “Let’s try a thought experiment. A visualization exercise.”

“When am I going to breathe again?”

“Just stfu for a minute and lemme get through this. Okay? Fella? Your fucking my concentration up!”

“Sorry man, just tryna breathe.”

“Okay. Here we go. Thought exercise:”

As the voice spoke the words consumed my thoughts, and jerked me away from that soft white and lilac flash.

“Picture a vast desert, black sand glittering in cold dead light. Fires burn frantic in the distance and you can hear the screams of a thousand people trampled under the feet of a terrible monster wrapped in bloody fur, spotted red and black like a hyena from the depths of hell. Only one head though. Not a Cerberus type situation—“

“Cerberus?”

“Forget I said that. Before your time. DO I NEED TO START OVER?!?”

“No.”

“You struggle to the top of a dune as the animal chews a hole through the side of a destroyed abode, viscera dangling off its yellow teeth. You catch the thing’s eye. It gleams at you with a vile expression. A genocide smile. It bounds toward you, earth shaking with every step. It sounds like war condensed to a growl, like every man, woman, and child that has ever died from now back 10,000 years. It sounds like misery that wants to kill its company. It sounds like plague and it is coming after everything you have ever loved.”

I fought back against the picture. Tried pushing it from my occipital lobe. I yearned for not too long ago when I was bouncing cosmic and my brain would not process fear. Because in that moment fear was all I knew. Pure indomitable terror rushed through me, threatening to crack my dead flesh apart and become something new. Some vile wretched thing that has no place on any plane of existence. And as the red speckled demon creature approached, a grin appearing on its gore smeared face, it opened its mouth. Then another splitting from the original, as though teeth were cutting through other teeth and ripping gums and replicating again, as close to infinity as one person can count. A procession of filth and horror that would be too much for even the cold blank stare of the universe.

“This terrible harbinger of unspeakable torment, a blight upon the skin of reality itself, it has never focused on a single thing more than it is right now. You are the apple of its eye. And it cannot wait to taste the sin inside.”

My heart suddenly, and frantically, began to beat, blood warming my numb arms and legs, forcing life through me like the sophisticated bit of soft machinery that it is. With that blood, that life flowing through me, my terror intensified to something I had never felt before. A feeling that could almost materialize into matter and if it did, that hideous red and black creature would be it.

“Okay. Are you prepared or whatever?”

“No im not im not im.”

“1... 2... 3...”

My eyes popped open and before me, locked onto my face, peering into whatever bit of soul this last few moments had exposed, were two stark white eyes.

“LOL! Had you going there didn't I? Hahahaha. You look so frightened! Oh shit. Thank you for the laugh. I needed that. LMAO.”

I was shaking and my heart was still beating out of my chest. “What was that then? That thing was in my brain, it was ripping me apart.” I began crying, sobbing, just breaking down.

“Oh I know buddy, it's okay. That was my brother. Hopefully you two never cross paths because he really fucking wanted to taste you. Like real bad”

“What is happening here?” I sat in a room with glowing blue walls and ornate white and gold gamer chairs complete with built in speakers on the headrests. Every square inch of the walls and floors were covered with television screens, each with a different moving picture of an explosion or dead body or strange planet or pieces of moving machinery speeding through crowded streets.

Across from me, sitting in the opposite chair was that black outline from the surviving buildings, encompassing ever shifting and expanding purple waves spiraling and coursing over the body shaped black hole. The head appeared to be galactic dust and in the center, those stark white holes, not quite glowing but not quite flat either, and so full of expression.

“Well some call me Absence, some call me Horlathik, but I prefer that handle from the good ole days @voidbro669 thats what the fuck I'm talking about and What's happening here is that I have a proposition for you. You can be the firebrand of the new world. You could change everything. And all you gotta do is dig down. Dig down and keep digging.”

The expression in the white eyes was earnest and focused.

“Just let me breathe again and I will listen.”

A few seconds pass

DEEP CATCHING BREATH

End Episode



