



The Embers Hunger

A Short Story By Rees Walther

Chapter I: The Whispering Flames

In the waning light of an autumn dusk, Elias Grayson arrived at the edge of town, his heart thrumming with anticipation. Before him loomed The Smoldering Pit, an abandoned barbecue restaurant with a history as dark as the soot-stained brick that framed its entrance. He had acquired the property for a modest sum, lured by the promise of restoring it to its former glory.

The restaurant's sign, still hanging by rusted chains, bore the remnants of its former splendor—golden letters dulled by time, charred edges hinting at past conflagrations. But it was the pit, the grand steel behemoth at the heart of the kitchen, that had truly enchanted him. Its doors, polished smooth from decades of use, exuded an air of reverence, as if it bore witness to secrets long buried beneath layers of grease and time.



With a gaze both curious and foreboding, Elias traced the jagged seams of the monstrous contraption before him—a grotesque amalgamation of the meticulous and the haphazard, a thing wrought by hands both masterful and careless. Here, in the cruel gleam of firelight, he discerned the ghost of a craftsman's intent: metal plates joined with an artisan's devotion, yet interrupted by crude welds, ill-fitting angles, and grotesque improvisations that whispered of desperation, of necessity, of something forced into being rather than born of design. And there—upon the door of the firebox, where tongues of heat licked hungrily at the iron—he beheld an etching, yet not crude nor frantic, but precise, immutable, as though stamped at the moment of the steel's very conception: *Hastings C.* The letters, deeply pressed into the steel, bore no sign of wear, no trembling hand, no tool unfit for the task. This name—perfect, deliberate—stood in eerie contrast to the jagged ruin of parts hastily joined around it, as though the firebox alone belonged to something older, something *other*. It had not been *added* to the

smoker; rather, the smoker had been built around *it*, a cage of welded desperation enclosing a purpose unknown. Elias shuddered, for in that name, cold and unwavering, lay a secret, waiting—waiting to be unearthed.

The town itself seemed to resist his presence, the people glancing warily as he passed. He had heard their mutterings, the superstitions that clung to the place like smoke to old wood. The Smoldering Pit, they said, had not been abandoned without cause. Strange things had transpired there, whispers of the unnatural echoing through its shadowed halls.

But Elias, a man of reason and ambition, dismissed their tales as idle folklore. Superstition had no place in business. He had come to make his mark, to craft a legacy built on the slow dance of smoke and flame.

Yet, the first sight of the pit unsettled him. Though untouched for years, it bore no sign of disrepair. The steel, dark with age and use, gleamed dully in the dim light, as if awaiting its next offering. The grates were clean, the ashpan devoid of dust, as though the fires had never truly died. A sense of unease stirred within him, a whisper at the back of his mind that something lingered still.

Beyond the restaurant, an adjacent structure loomed—a forgotten relic with hollow windows, a façade crumbling beneath the weight of years. The mere sight of it sent a chill skittering down Elias's spine. There was a presence about it, something unseen yet keenly felt, as though the building itself inhaled and exhaled with the shifting wind.

Determined to press forward, Elias pushed the disquiet aside. There was work to be done. The past, no matter how gnarled its roots, could not interfere with his future.

As the days passed, he dedicated himself to peeling back the layers of decay, uncovering the bones of the restaurant beneath the dust and grime. The kitchen, with its tarnished steel and soot-streaked walls, carried an air of history that refused to be scrubbed clean. Each scrape of his tools against the steel pit sent a vibration through the space, an echo that lingered longer than it should have, as though the walls themselves were listening.

Even as he worked, he could not shake the feeling of being watched. Shadows pooled in corners where the light should have reached. The rafters groaned with the settling of the structure, yet some noises defied explanation—a distant thud, a whisper carried through the ventilation shafts.

Elias found himself lingering at the threshold of the abandoned structure next door. Something about it called to him, though he could not name the sensation. The boards were nailed fast, their wood warped and splintering, but a single pane of broken glass allowed him to peer inside.

The darkness beyond was nearly absolute, but he thought—just for a moment—that he saw movement, the shifting of something just beyond the edge of his sight.

The townsfolk's warnings returned to him in those quiet moments, tales of flickering shapes glimpsed through the slats of the forgotten structure. They spoke of a man, a lone figure who had once stood watch over the restaurant long after it had closed. Some claimed it was the shade of Jeremiah Cross himself, doomed to linger beside the pit he had worshipped.

At night, the air thickened with the scent of woodsmoke, though no fire had been lit. The winds carried with them a sound just at the threshold of hearing, the indistinct murmur of voices lost to time. Elias dismissed these sensations as tricks of an overworked mind, yet as he turned the key in the lock each evening, he could not shake the feeling that he was not alone.

That night, as he lay in his rented room above the restaurant, the dreams came. Fire roared in his mind, its tendrils licking at the corners of his vision. The scent of charred meat thickened in his nostrils, and he swore he heard something—a voice, soft as smoke, curling through the flames. He saw figures emerging from the fire, silhouettes writhing and twisting in agony before dissolving into embers.

He woke drenched in sweat, his breath ragged. The echoes of the dream still curled in his mind, whispering things he dared not repeat. He found himself staring at the ceiling, his thoughts drawn inexorably to the pit below. The feeling of unease had blossomed into something greater, something vast and hungry.

The following morning, he wandered the property in search of distractions, but nothing could shake the weight pressing upon him. The pit, for all its silence, seemed to be waiting. He felt it in the way the air thickened around it, the way its steel doors sat slightly ajar as though inviting him to peer inside.

At midday, he resolved to begin testing the smoker. He stacked wood within its steel belly, hands steady despite the gnawing dread coiled within him. He struck a match, watched as the flame took hold. The fire blazed, curling and licking at the wood, and for a moment, Elias felt the warmth drive back the unease that had taken root.

Then came the sound—a soft, almost imperceptible whisper rising with the smoke. The voice was not clear, not words exactly, but something just beyond comprehension, threading through the air like an unseen presence watching, waiting.

The fire burned high, the wood crackling, but Elias found no comfort in its light. He could not shake the sensation that the pit was aware of him now, that it had been waiting for his hands to bring it back to life.

That night, the dreams returned, more vivid than before. He stood before the pit, the fire raging, yet it cast no heat. Shapes writhed in its depths, figures forming and dissolving in the embers. A hand stretched toward him from the smoke, its fingers charred black, its nails clawing at the air. The whisper came again, curling in his ears like a serpent's breath.

He woke with a start, the scent of burning flesh thick in the room, though no fire had been lit. He sat upright, his body trembling, his mind unwilling to accept what it knew to be true.

The pit had awaited him.

And now, it had begun to whisper his name.

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