

Episode 11 — The Congregation of the Sleepless



Part One: The Waking

The meeting hall was lit by candles. Forty candles, maybe more, arranged in concentric circles on the floor, their flames upright and still in the perfectly motionless air. The commune members sat in the space between the circles, cross-legged or kneeling, their eyes open, their hands folded in their laps or resting on their knees.

They had been sitting that way for six hours.

No one spoke. Occasionally, someone would shift slightly, adjusting their posture, but these were small movements—the minimal adjustments of bodies trained over months and years to remain as still as possible while still breathing. The air in the meeting hall was warm and thick and smelled like candle wax and human breath and something else, something that came from bodies pushed past their natural limits.

Outside the window, beyond the glass and the darkness, Rachel Yung watched her sister sit among the others.

Her sister's name was Lily. Lily was twenty-three years old and she'd come to the Congregation of the

Sleepless three months ago to find spiritual peace. She'd written about it in an email to Rachel: how the Director had said that sleep was the last remaining cage, that most human suffering came from the unconscious mind dragging the conscious mind backward into trauma and fear. How, if one could transcend sleep, one could transcend suffering. How, if one could maintain full wakefulness, one could become something new.

Rachel had thought it was a phase. Lily had had phases before—veganism, online meditation communities, a brief obsession with conspiracy theories. This would pass.

But Lily had not come home for her mother's birthday in April. And when Rachel had finally driven out to the commune in the rural valley, she found her sister in the meeting hall, surrounded by people who didn't seem to be suffering so much as they seemed to be existing in a state of profound, peaceful emptiness.

Rachel tapped on the glass.

Lily didn't turn. Didn't acknowledge the sound. Her eyes remained open, focused on some point in the middle distance that wasn't actually present in the room. Her hands didn't move. For a moment, Rachel wondered if her sister was asleep with her eyes open, but that wasn't possible. That wasn't how sleep worked.

Then Rachel's eyes adjusted to the darkness inside the hall and she could see something else—something suspended in the space above the seated congregation, something that didn't have a clear shape but had a sense of presence, translucent and vast and ancient in a way that made her mind hurt.

She ran.

—

Ace heard about the Congregation of the Sleepless from a truck driver at a rest stop. The driver had heard about it from someone else, and that someone else had heard about it from a third party, and so the information had traveled the way such information always traveled—distorted, partial, but grounded in some core truth.

"There's a cult out in Harrow Valley," the driver had said. "Some religious group. One of my regulars went out there looking for her sister. Came back saying the people there don't sleep anymore. That the leader says they've transcended sleep. That it's making them happy. Or it's making them something that looks like happiness and they can't tell the difference."

Ace had filed it away. She always paid attention to happiness that wasn't quite right.

Three days later, she drove to Harrow Valley.

—

The commune occupied a wide valley surrounded by gentle hills, far enough from any major road that you'd have to know where you were going to find it. The buildings were practical and neat—dormitories, a kitchen house, a library, a meeting hall. The gardens were well-maintained, the fences in good repair, the paths swept clean. It had the appearance of a place where people were taking good care of themselves.

The person who came to meet Ace at the gate was a man named Director Soren. He was sixty or

older, with grey hair and a lined face, and he smiled in a way that was probably genuine, though Ace had learned not to trust the appearance of genuine smiles.

“Welcome,” he said. “We don't receive many visitors. Are you seeking? The message of the Congregation spreads outward always. Those who are ready find us.”

Ace said nothing.

“Well,” Soren continued, “you're here. You might as well stay the night. We have a guest room. There's dinner in the kitchen house, and you're welcome to join the evening gathering if you feel called.”

Ace nodded.

—

She observed while pretending to rest.

The guest room was simple: a bed, a window, a small table with a pitcher of water. She didn't drink the water. She never drank or ate anything offered by places like this, places with their own internal logic that had bent themselves into strange shapes. Instead, she sat by the window, completely still, and watched the commune as evening fell.

The residents—she counted roughly thirty adults and eight children—moved through the compound with an eerie uniformity of purpose. They did chores without speaking much. They prepared food in the kitchen. They tended the gardens. But there was something wrong in the texture of their movement. Delays between stimulus and response. Eyes that didn't track properly. A sense of bodies being operated remotely by minds that had lost the thread of connection.

At dusk, they began to gather in the meeting hall.

Ace waited until she heard the sound of candles being lit, then followed.

—

She stood in the entrance to the meeting hall and observed. Forty or fifty candles now, arranged in concentric circles. The residents were sitting in the rings, their eyes open, their breathing synchronized in a way that suggested either training or something deeper than training. Some of the children were already having difficulty maintaining the posture—a six-year-old girl's eyes were starting to close, and she was fighting to keep them open, pinching her own arm occasionally to stay alert.

Ace could see it now—the thing in the space above them.

It wasn't solid. It existed in the gaps between how the human eye was meant to process light and space, in the places where attention got slightly confused about what it was looking at. It was vast—the peak of it nearly touching the meeting hall ceiling—and it had something like roots anchoring it there, things that looked like they were made of thin threads or filaments. Below those threads, extending downward, more threads descended toward the seated people. Each thread ended in a point of contact with a forehead.

Each thread carried a color. Reds and blues and golds, colors that looked like they might be dreams. Colors that the entity was slowly pulling upward toward itself, consuming.

Ace understood.

—

Part Two: The Threshold

She returned to the guest room and sat on the bed. She waited for the compound to fully sleep—the commune members would collapse eventually, crashing from the accumulated exhaustion of continuous wakefulness, probably around three or four in the morning when the body's circadian rhythm reached its absolute nadir and could no longer be overridden.

But Ace knew that “sleep” was not quite accurate terminology for what those people would experience. They would collapse into a fugue state, yes, but they wouldn't actually sleep. Sleep required REM cycles, required the strange machinery of dreams and memory consolidation. The Dream Eater had devoured that capacity from them. What they did at night was something closer to unconsciousness—a blank state, a nothing, a powerless descent into a void.

She waited in the darkness of her room for that moment.

When she felt the shift—when the compound's energy changed from waking exhaustion to collapse—she stood up, positioned her back against the wall, and began to control her breathing.

Slow. Deep. The kind of breathing that was taught in meditation practices and used by free divers holding their breath against the pressure of the ocean. She'd learned it years ago, taught by someone she'd known for only a few weeks and had never seen again. The technique was simple: you could hold yourself in the space between sleeping and waking, the threshold where the conscious mind was shutting down but hadn't yet crossed into the land of dreams. Most people couldn't sustain it. Most people slipped too far in one direction or the other. But if you had the discipline, if you had the pain threshold and the focus, you could hold yourself on that knife's edge indefinitely.

Her consciousness began to fracture.

—

The liminal space looked nothing like the physical compound. It was the same space but rendered in a different register of perception, the way a piano can play the same note in different octaves. The meeting hall was still the meeting hall, but the light was different—a thin phosphorescence that seemed to come from the walls themselves. The candles were still burning, but their flames were visible now as threads of directed intention, lines of focus that pointed toward the thing hanging above the space.

The entity.

Seen fully, outside the bandwidth of normal human vision, it was enormous. It was shaped like something between an octopus and a cupped hand, with a dozen or more appendages—some of them thick and muscular, some of them delicate and filament-thin. The interior of those appendages was luminous, filled with images and fragments and half-remembered scenes. Dreams. Decades of dreams, consumed and preserved. The entity was made of stolen sleep.

Each thread connected to a sleeping person below. Ace could see the connection points clearly now: thin lines of pearl-white light extending from forehead to the creature's body, flowing upward in a constant stream. These people weren't sleeping. They were dreaming, or rather, they were in the state where dreaming should be happening, and the entity was positioned to intercept that state

before it could manifest. It was eating the boundary between sleep and waking, preventing the crossing.

The sleeping inhabitants of the compound were arranged in concentric circles, the pattern identical to the candle arrangement in the physical world. Ace understood: this was a resonance space, a harmonic chamber that made the entity's feeding more efficient. The geometry mattered.

She stepped forward into the center of the circles.

—

The entity noticed her immediately.

It had been so focused on the people it was consuming that the introduction of a new consciousness in the liminal space registered as a violent disruption. Several of its appendages released the people they'd been feeding on and turned toward her. The reaction was not aggressive so much as it was curious and proprietary—the response of something that had held absolute dominion in this space and couldn't quite comprehend the introduction of anything that could move independently.

Ace drew her blades.

The weapons existed in both spaces—the physical and the liminal—though they looked different here. In the ordinary world, they were emerald and sharp and real. Here, they were light and intention and something older than intention, a kind of cutting principle that predated knives. They would work on something made of stolen dreams.

She advanced toward the entity.

—

The fight was disorienting.

Ace had fought things in the physical world, things made of flesh and bone and blood. She understood how bodies broke, how to find the pressure points and vital structures. But this thing had no clear structure. It was distributed, undulating, existing in more dimensions than her brain could quite keep track of. When she struck at it, the blade passed through appendages that weren't quite solid, that seemed to be made of condensed light and absorbed memory.

The entity counterattacked by trying to consume her.

It pulled at her consciousness, trying to drag her deeper into the liminal space, trying to convert her awareness into something it could digest. The pressure was immense—she could feel it like a hand pressing against her chest, against her mind, trying to flatten her into the same state of peaceful emptiness that the commune members inhabited.

She kept her breathing even.

She was still holding herself on the knife's edge, still maintaining her foothold in both the physical and the liminal. The entity couldn't pull her all the way across because she wouldn't let it. She was anchored on both sides of the boundary—one foot in sleep, one foot in waking. She was the threshold itself, and the threshold was her weapon.

She drove forward.

Her blades found something that might have been the entity's center—a dense knot of consumed dreams, a place where all the threads converged before being processed into the entity's own being. It was protected by layers of itself, by appendages that wrapped around the core and tried to defend it. But Ace was faster, sharper, more real in the liminal space than anything that lived only there.

She cut through the layers.

—

The entity died badly.

Its scream wasn't sound but sensation—a noise that existed as pressure and emotional resonance and the sound of every dream that had ever been silenced, all of them suddenly released at once. The entity's body convulsed, and the stolen dreams inside it began to leak outward, fragments and images and half-remembered moments dissipating into the space of the meeting hall like stars being snuffed out.

The threads connecting the entity to the commune members all snapped simultaneously.

Ace felt the moment of release like a pressure equalizing—the entity was gone, or going, dissolving back into whatever nothing it had emerged from. The liminal space around her was collapsing, the phosphorescence fading, the walls of the meeting hall becoming ordinary again.

She was pulled back.

—

Part Three: After Sleeping

She came fully into waking consciousness gasping.

Her back was still against the guest room wall. Her breathing was ragged. The dawn light was just beginning to come through the window, that grey-blue time before sunrise when the night hasn't quite admitted its defeat. She was alive. She was intact. Every surface of her body ached with a deep, cellular exhaustion that came from holding consciousness in two places simultaneously for hours.

The compound was waking up.

She could hear it: the sound of feet, the movement of bodies, the confused murmurs of people waking from the deepest sleep they'd experienced in weeks or months. There was crying. There was gasping. There was the sound of someone vomiting, their body rejecting whatever equilibrium the sleeplessness had imposed on it.

Ace left the guest room and walked through the compound.

The meeting hall doors were open. Inside, all the people were on the ground, sprawled in the spaces between the candles that had burned down to stubs and wax pools. They were unconscious—true unconsciousness, the deep and demanding kind that the body imposed on itself when it could no longer be overridden. The children were there too, including the small girl who'd been fighting to keep her eyes open. She was sleeping the way children sleep, her expression peaceful, her breathing deep and even.

They would sleep for a long time. The debt was immense. The body had gone weeks—some of them

months—without true sleep, and the debt had to be paid.

Rachel Yung was standing in the doorway when Ace turned. Lily's sister, the one who'd come looking, who'd run when she saw the thing in the space above the sleeping.

"Is she—" Rachel started.

"She's sleeping," Ace said. "She'll wake up. It'll take time. Days, maybe. But she'll wake up."

"Will she be..." Rachel trailed off, not quite able to articulate the question.

"Different?" Ace said. "Probably. People are different after that happens to them. But she'll be her own person again. That's what matters."

Ace walked past Rachel, out of the meeting hall, toward her vehicle.

Rachel followed her. "Thank you. I don't know what you—"

Ace got into the vehicle without responding. She started the engine. Rachel stood at the compound gate and watched as she drove away, the vehicle disappearing into the morning mist that was just beginning to settle in Harrow Valley.

Behind them, the people slept.

The Director's body was among them, one hand still reaching upward toward the space where the entity had dissolved. When he woke—if he woke with full coherence—he would be changed. The months of being partially occupied, of having his consciousness shared with something that had fed on his entire congregation, would leave marks. But those were not Ace's concern.

She drove north, away from Harrow Valley, away from the compound and the sleeping people and the candles that had burned down to nothing. The road ahead was empty and clear, and she kept her eyes on it, watching for the next sign of something that shouldn't be alive, the next whisper of a place where a demon had taken root.

Behind her, the valley settled into ordinary sleep.

The Congregation of the Sleepless would recover. The commune would fragment or reform. The people would find new ways to understand what had happened to them. Some would call it a spiritual experience. Some would call it a sickness. Some would simply try to forget. In a year or five years or ten, it would be a story that got told and retold until it lost its truth entirely, until it became legend.

The sky was lightening toward genuine sunrise. Another day was coming. Ace drove into it without hesitation, without reflection, carrying with her only the practical knowledge that somewhere else, something else was feeding in the dark.

And there was always somewhere else.

[ace, demon-hunt-years](#)

—

© 2025-2026. "World of Ace, Mai and Shammy" and all original characters, settings, story elements, and concepts are the intellectual property of the author. All rights reserved.

Non-commercial fan works are allowed with attribution.

Commercial use, redistribution, or adaptation requires explicit permission from the author.

Contact: editor at publication-x.com

From:

<https://datavault.ws/> - **DataVault**

Permanent link:

<https://datavault.ws/doku.php/demon-hunt-years:episode11>

Last update: **22/03/2026 14:33**

