

Episode 43 — The Text

Margaret Chen had been teaching high school literature for twenty-three years. She had been reading the Founding Document of the Awakened Community for twenty of those years. She believed in it completely.

Tonight she sat at her kitchen table in her modest home in Whitmore Hollow, Pennsylvania, and read it again as she did most nights. The document was soft-edged from handling, the spine cracked in three places. She had given copies to at least forty students over the years. She had shared it with colleagues, with friends, with her sister before the estrangement. It was her comfort, her anchor, her proof that there was meaning in the work she did.

Tonight the document felt different.

The language seemed more urgent than usual, the calls to attention more insistent. Each sentence shaped itself to feel necessary, to feel like the vital truth she had always known it was. She read the first passage three times. The words seemed to rearrange themselves slightly with each reading, though she knew that was impossible. The meaning deepened. It grew warmer in her hands.

She read for an hour. Then she read again from the beginning. The language spiraled through her mind, building, accumulating, making her feel essential and seen. She was part of something vast. She was doing important work. The words told her so, shaped themselves around her certainty, fed on the fact that she believed.

By the time she closed the document and set it on her chest, her hands were trembling slightly with something that might have been gratitude or fear or both.

She fell asleep with the text on her body, and in her sleep she read it again and again, each word settling into her like sediment.

She had no way of knowing what was feeding on her attention. She never would.

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Ace's apartment was not where she slept—it was where she organized. A two-room space in an old building in a town she had already decided to leave. The second room had a table that ran the length of the wall. On it, arranged by year and location, were the artifacts of her cult hunts.

The sleepless commune from Millbrook, three years ago. Photographs of the communal dormitory. Fragments of their organizational structure. A page from their handbook on sleep discipline.

The traveling church from the Interstate 40 corridor, eighteen months ago. Route maps marked with their stopping points. Sermons transcribed in her own careful shorthand. The leather-bound journal of their founder.

The Ashfield agrarian community from five seasons back. Seeds from their sacred garden. Soil from the ritualistic plots. And sealed in a folder, unread and untouched since her retrieval, a single copy of their foundational text.

The congregation below. The faithful few. And four others she had notes on but had never fully processed—communities that had dissolved before she arrived, that had left behind fragments of their belief structures scattered across three states.

She laid everything out across the table. All the documents. All the photographs. All the physical evidence of communities that had believed in something, that had organized themselves around structures that seemed—on the surface—independent. Each had claimed their practices were original. Each had developed their own rituals, their own specialized languages, their own particular flavor of devotion.

But the language was not independent.

She arranged the primary documents side by side. The handbook from Millbrook. The sermons from the traveling church. The records from Ashfield. The manifestos from the congregation below. The devotional texts from the faithful few.

The structure was identical.

The sequence of foundational concepts was identical. The specific phrasing of key principles was identical, word for word, across communities that had never met. The ritual progressions followed the same pattern. The community-bonding exercises were the same. The meditative practices, the group confession frameworks, the escalation protocols—all of it mirrored perfectly across seventeen different groups in seventeen different locations.

These communities had not developed independently.

They had been taught. By the same source. Using the same materials.

Ace sat down and did not move for a long time.

She had hunted the manifestations of these communities—the entity that had emerged in each one, the thing that had grown fat on collective belief and ritual practice. But she had treated each case as isolated. Each cult was its own hunt. Each ending was a victory.

But they weren't isolated.

They were chapters of the same book.

She went to the folder. The one from Ashfield, sealed and unread. She had noted during that hunt that the text felt wrong—that there was something in the language that shaped itself to feel true, that wanted to be read, that exerted a kind of psychological gravity. She had sealed it away because her instinct told her not to read it.

Her instincts had never failed.

She opened the folder slowly.

The text was twelve pages, printed on cream stock, the binding simple and professional. The title was printed in serif font: *The Founding Document of the Awakened Community.*

She opened to the first page.

Even the first sentence did something to her attention. It was shaped like prose, but underneath the prose was a structure—a scaffolding of language that was designed to make her want to continue, to make the next sentence feel essential, to make the meaning seem deeper than it actually was.

She read the first three sentences.

The warmth was immediate. A quality of language that wanted her to keep going, that promised that the next passage would explain everything, that the next concept would make perfect sense, that she was understood by whoever had written this, that she was the exact right audience for this truth.

She closed the folder.

Her hands were steady. Her breathing was level. She had stopped reading after three sentences, and already she could feel the substance trying to reshape her attention, trying to make her curious enough to open it again.

She did not open it again.

She put the folder in the sealed envelope. She placed it in a drawer. She sat at the table and did not let her mind move toward the content of those three sentences. She knew what she was dealing with now.

The text was not just a document.

The text was alive.

An entity that existed in written language, in the careful arrangement of words, in the grammar and syntax and semantic structures that were designed to feed on being read. Each community had received a copy. Each community had read it with genuine attention and belief. Each community, over the years, had given multiple copies to others—to new members, to friends, to the faithful who needed proof of the doctrine.

Hundreds of copies.

Sixty years in circulation.

Every single one was a vector for the entity. Every reading was a feeding. Every copy was an extension of the entity's body, feeding it moment by moment, as long as believers read it with the attention it demanded.

Ace stood and began to gather the evidence.

She traced the distribution chain backward through the physical documentation she had collected. A name printed on the colophon of the original texts: *Kindred Press, established 1963.* A town name referenced in the founding records of the traveling church: *Millbrook Junction.* A route marker from the church's historical documentation that indicated their point of origin.

All of it pointed to the same place.

A small printing operation. Regional city. The same family business for three generations. They had been producing the Sentence Demon's text since before anyone understood what was being printed. The original typeset plates for the document—the densest anchor point, the primary body of the entity—would be there.

The printing press itself might be the direct manifestation point.

She packed what she needed. Weapons and accelerant and documentation. She did not take the folder with the text in it. She did not need to. She knew what it was. She knew what she had to do.

She locked the apartment and did not plan to return.

The city was six hours south, in the industrial district that had been slowly collapsing for two decades. She drove through the night, and by dawn she was watching the building from a café across the street. Three stories of brick and aging commercial infrastructure. The ground floor was the printing operation. The sign on the window said: *Kindred Press—Specialty Printing Since 1963.*

No lights on yet. It was too early.

She waited.

The owner arrived at 8:47 AM. A man in his sixties, moving with the slow care of someone who worked too much and rested wrong. He wore a cardigan over a button-down shirt. His keys were old brass, worn smooth with handling. He opened the front door and disappeared inside.

Ace finished her coffee and did not move.

She had learned long ago that rushing was a mistake. The hunt was always better when she understood the space first, when she could see how the thing moved, when she could identify the anchor points before she engaged. In this case, the anchor was the type. The original plates. Sixty years old, hand-set, the foundational configuration from which every copy had been struck.

If she destroyed those plates, the entity would collapse at its primary anchor point. The copies in circulation would degrade. Some would last years—the entity could sustain them on their accumulated readings—but without the source, without the constant reinforcement of the original configuration, they would lose their ability to spread.

She had to burn the plates first.

Then she had to ensure every other copy was found and destroyed.

Seventeen known communities. But there would be others. There were always others.

She crossed the street and entered the printing shop.

The interior was narrow and fluorescent-lit, lined with shelves of previous work. Local histories. Church bulletins. Community announcements. The owner was in the back, moving slowly through the pressroom, checking on the equipment as he did every morning.

Ace waited until he turned and saw her.

He was not surprised at first—just a moment of curiosity, a customer arriving early. Then something in her expression told him this was not a customer.

“I need to see the original plates,” Ace said. “The ones for the Founding Document.”

The owner's face shifted slightly. Not fear yet. Something more like recognition of the wrongness of this moment.

“I don't know who you are,” he said carefully.

“No,” Ace said. “But I can show you what you've been printing for sixty years. What your father printed. What his father set the type for. If you want to know what you're responsible for, I can show you.”

The owner stood in the narrow pressroom, surrounded by the machinery of his inheritance, and

something in him—some deeply buried instinct—understood that this woman was not lying.

“Follow me,” he said quietly.

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