

Episode 44 — The Distributor

The pressroom was spotless. Everything in its place. The old letterpress dominated the space—a massive thing, cast iron and carved wood, maintained with the kind of devotion that came from inherited responsibility. The owner moved through the room with the slow precision of someone walking through a temple.

“My grandfather set it up in 1963,” he said. “The same year the press arrived. The same year the first orders came in.”

He pulled open a flat drawer in a filing cabinet beside the press. Inside, preserved under archival paper, were the original typeset plates. Hand-set, each letter placed individually, the configuration fixed in lead. The text was small but clear. *The Founding Document of the Awakened Community.*

Ace looked at the plates without touching them.

She could feel it. Not like the sensation of being watched—that was the Watcher, something distant and documented. This was different. This was the presence of something that had been dormant in the metal and type for sixty years, drawing power from every reading of every copy that had been struck from these plates. It was aware. It was patient. It was hungry.

The entity's anchor was here, concentrated in the lead and copper, in the precise arrangement of characters that had been impressed into millions of sheets of paper over decades.

“I received orders from communities,” the owner said. “Small orders. Fifty copies, hundred copies. They would call or write. They said it was important community material. I never questioned it. My father told me these were good people doing good work. He believed in them.”

Ace said: “Show me everything else. Every copy you have in stock. Every record of orders. Every distribution record.”

They spent the next two hours documenting the extent of the entity's reach. The owner pulled files from a back office—decades of invoices, order sheets, mailing records. Seventeen communities were directly documented. But there were hints of more—references to other organizations that had received copies, names that appeared only once, addresses that had changed or been forwarded multiple times.

“How many copies?” Ace asked.

“Over sixty years?” The owner looked through the records with the expression of someone doing mathematics they did not want to complete. “Easily in the thousands. Fifty, hundred, sometimes two hundred per order, multiple orders per year. Some communities reordered. Multiple times.”

Thousands of copies. Each one a vector. Each one containing the concentrated presence of the entity, distributed across territories the owner had never seen, feeding on the belief and attention of people he had never met.

Ace pulled out the documentation she had brought—the photographs of the communities, the evidence of the harm. She laid them on his desk.

The photographs showed the manifestations: the things that had emerged when the entity had fed enough, when the accumulated belief had reached critical mass. The sleepless commune where people had forgotten how to close their eyes. The traveling church where followers had begun to

experience synchronization of thought, their individual minds dissolving into a shared consciousness. The Ashfield community where the soil itself had become something other, where the plants grew in configurations that didn't follow any known botany.

The owner looked at the photographs for a long time.

"How many people?" he asked finally. His voice was very quiet.

"The plates," Ace said. "Where are they?"

Not unkindly. Just directing him somewhere useful. He nodded slowly and walked back to the pressroom. Ace followed.

She moved toward the filing cabinet where the original plates were stored. The drawer was shallow, the plates fragile with age. She reached for them.

The pressroom went wrong.

The machinery activated—not violently, but with a kind of purposeful inevitability. The letterpress came alive. Its carriage began to move. The platens rotated. And from the activation, from the ancient machinery responding to a stimulus it had been designed to answer for sixty years, text began to appear.

The entity manifested through the press.

Words printed themselves onto every surface: the walls, the floor, the ceiling, the faces of the equipment. The Founding Document's language began to fill the space, the same words, repeated, but each repetition slightly different—slight variations in phrasing, subtle shifts in emphasis, as if the entity was cycling through its vocabulary, testing which configurations would be most compelling, which syntax would be most likely to catch attention and hold it.

The text crawled across the walls like something alive. It wanted to be read. The entity was broadcasting itself, trying to find angles of approach, trying to reshape the space into something that would compel attention, that would pull focus regardless of intent.

Ace did not look at the walls.

She kept her eyes on the filing cabinet. On the drawer. On the work she had come to do. She did not let her periphery settle on the text. She did not let her mind engage with what the words were saying. She crossed the pressroom by feel and by the rhythm of her breathing, by the small adjustments of her body that let her move through space without sight.

The text on the walls became more frantic.

New words began to appear, words that were not in the original document. Words that were improvised, desperate. The entity was trying new approaches, new phrases, trying to find the configuration that would make her look, that would make her read, that would make her pause long enough for the meaning to settle into her.

She found the drawer. She pulled it open.

The plates were there. Thirteen of them, the complete configuration of the text. She drew both blades.

The pressroom convulsed.

The text on the walls began to move faster, the words rearranging, the language becoming more primal. It simplified. The longer sentences broke down into shorter ones. The complex syntax collapsed into fragments. The vocabulary shrunk. Words began to repeat, cycling through desperation, through the entity's attempt to maintain coherence as its primary anchor began to be destroyed.

Ace drove the first blade through the first plate.

The letterpress screamed. Not an auditory sound—something deeper, something that moved through bone. The machinery twisted against itself, metal groaning. The walls rippled. The text that covered them convulsed, letters rearranging themselves in frantic patterns.

She withdrew the first blade.

The plate was ruined—lead bent, the type-face shattered, the configuration destroyed. The first copy she had sealed away and not read, the one from Ashfield, suddenly felt less heavy in her mind. The entity had lost some of its coherence. It had lost the first layer of its anchor.

She moved to the second plate.

Each blade strike was precise. Each destruction was absolute. With each plate she ruined, the entity's manifestation in the pressroom weakened. The text on the walls lost vocabulary. It went from complex sentences to sentence fragments. Then to single sentences repeated over and over. Then to single words, cycling through the same three or four terms again and again.

By the time she reached the final three plates, the text on the walls had degraded to single letters.

She destroyed the eighth plate. The ninth. The tenth. The eleventh. The twelfth.

By the thirteenth, there was nothing left but repetition of single letters. A-A-A. E-E-E. The entity's language had collapsed to its phonetic essence. The meaning had drained away entirely. The awareness that had lived in the plates for sixty years was dissolving.

She drove her blade through the final plate.

The pressroom went silent.

The text on the walls was gone. The machinery stopped. The letterpress stood inert, just metal and wood and the accumulated weight of equipment that had been used for something it had not known it was being used for.

Ace cleaned her blades and turned back toward the office.

The owner was sitting at his desk, surrounded by printed copies of the Founding Document. Not the original documents she had shown him—those were sealed in the files. These were copies, printed in the normal way, on regular stock, stacked on every surface of his office. Hundreds of them, perhaps thousands, all the copies that had been in storage, that were awaiting distribution to new communities, that were intended to continue the entity's reach into new territories.

The owner was staring at the papers around him.

He did not look at Ace. He did not speak. But she could see the moment when the weight of

complicity had settled fully into him—the understanding that his hands had printed these, that his machinery had struck them from plates he had inherited without question, that his family's devotion to the craft had served something that had never been anything but hunger.

“Burn everything,” Ace said. “Everything in this building that you can't identify as your own personal property. Everything else. All the copies. All the papers. All the materials. Burn it.”

She said it once.

The owner nodded slowly and began to move, reaching for the papers on his desk with the movement of a man climbing out of water.

Ace walked out of the pressroom and did not look back.

Behind her, she could already hear him gathering materials, opening windows, the sound of his footsteps crossing the office. She did not need to watch. He would burn it all. The weight of what he had been doing, now made visible, would drive him to cleanse the space of it.

She stepped out onto the street and into the evening light.

The building was already beginning to smell of smoke.

She drove north, toward the seventeen communities she had documentation on. Toward the hundreds of copies that were still in circulation. Toward the slow work of gathering and burning that would take weeks, perhaps months.

The source was destroyed. The entity's primary anchor was gone, the original configuration shattered across the pressroom floor. The copies in circulation would degrade. Without the constant reinforcement of the original plates, without new copies being struck from the source, the distributed presence of the entity would begin to dissolve. Some copies would last years, sustained by the accumulated belief of their readers. But they would not strengthen. They would not spread.

The hunt was not finished.

But the hunt was no longer impossible.

Ace drove, and the violet light of the setting sun caught the edges of her blades, and somewhere in her jacket pocket, the folded page with the older handwriting was still there: *There are others who have carried what you carry. We have kept all of them.*

She did not know what that meant yet.

But she knew that finishing this hunt would give her the time and distance to find out.

Behind her, in the city, smoke was rising from the printing operation. The owner was standing in his pressroom, surrounded by the ashes of the text, understanding finally what his inheritance had been.

Ahead of her, the road was long, and the seventeen communities were spread across the territory like nodes in a network that was slowly starving.

She drove, and the hunt continued.

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