

Episode 46 — Ash and Print

Part One: Convergence

The communities were scattered across a geography that had never meant to hold them together. They had been connected only by the founding text, by the sentences that had bound them into a network of faith and feeding. Now that the entity was dead—collapsed in the Hollow Church, its consciousness scattered into nothing—the connections were severing. Ace moved through that unraveling like a thread pulling through cloth, appearing in each community in sequence, bearing the necessity of what had to happen next.

Seven communities. Seven copies of the founding text. Seven fires to light.

She moved methodically. No pattern of travel that would have drawn the attention of people who noticed such things. She took back roads through states that looked essentially identical to her—the same hills, the same small towns built around highways that served them and never quite took them seriously. The truck smelled like diesel and old upholstery and the accumulation of days spent in motion.

The first community didn't need to be convinced.

Part Two: The Study Group

They met on Tuesday evenings in a community center that had been repurposed from a grain storage facility. Ace found them in the middle of a reading session when she arrived in the late afternoon—six people arranged around a folding table, three copies of the founding text open in front of them, hands following along as they read the passage aloud in rotation.

She stood in the doorway. They looked up. The reading stopped. The oldest of them—a man named Richard, she would learn, who had received the text from a distant cousin fifteen years ago—recognized immediately what she was there to do. He didn't ask. He simply got up and began collecting the copies.

“We knew something was wrong,” said a woman in her forties, gathering the pages carefully as though they might shatter. “Two weeks ago the words started to move. We could all see it. We thought maybe it was just us, maybe we were finally starting to see the truth beneath the text, you know? But then last Sunday we felt it go. We felt whatever was here just... stop being here.”

Ace didn't speak. She accepted the copies as Richard stacked them and took them outside to the property where she'd set up a burn barrel. The woman followed her out.

“Was any of it real?” the woman asked. Not defiant. Just asking, the way you'd ask a stranger for the time.

Ace paused. The sky was moving through late afternoon into early evening. The light had that particular quality it got in autumn, when days started running out and you could feel it in the air. She looked at the woman—mid-forties, work-worn hands, eyes that had probably seen more than she'd wanted to.

“The people were real,” Ace said.

The woman nodded. That was answer enough. Ace lit the burn barrel. The copies of the founding text went in one by one, pages curling, ink scorching black, the paper becoming ash. The woman watched

until the last page was consumed, then turned and walked back toward the community center. Ace let the fire burn completely out before she left.

Part Three: Three Generations

The second community took longer.

The house was built in the style of another era—Victorian bones wrapped in utilitarian additions, the structure having been added to and modified until it had achieved a kind of organic architectural chaos. The grandmother who answered the door was in her eighties and made it clear in the first moment that she did not intend to hand over anything.

"I've had my copy for thirty years," she said. "My daughter read from it. My granddaughter grew up hearing those words. That doesn't just go away because something bad was using them."

Ace said nothing. She asked to come inside. The grandmother, perhaps because she was old enough to recognize futility when it introduced itself politely, allowed it.

The copy of the founding text was in a shelf beside the grandfather's chair. The leather cover had softened from decades of handling, the pages had taken on the color of old cream, the spine had cracked and been repaired and cracked again. This was not an object that had been read occasionally in a study group. This was an object that had been loved into its current shape.

Ace sat across from the grandmother and did not speak for two hours. The grandmother held the text in her lap and did not look at Ace. They shared the silence. Around them, the house held its age and its history—pictures on mantle-pieces, furniture that had absorbed the weight of living, the accumulated presence of a life lived in one location over decades.

"It felt like it was listening," the grandmother said eventually. Not to Ace. Just into the air.

"It was," Ace replied.

The grandmother looked down at the text in her lap. Her hands were liver-spotted, trembling slightly with age. She opened the cover. She looked at the first page—the opening words of the founding text, the sentences that had been distributed to seventeen communities sixty years ago, the language that had been the vector for a feeding presence that had never quite been material enough to be called alive but was alive nonetheless.

She closed the book and handed it to Ace.

They drove to a small clearing on the property's edge. The grandmother insisted on watching the fire. She wore a cardigan against the evening cold and stood in her driveway as the pages burned, curling and blackening, the spine cracking in the heat, the covers coming apart like the body of something finally releasing itself from the structure that had held it together.

When it was done, when there was nothing left but ash and fragments of leather, the grandmother turned without speaking and walked back into the house. Ace waited until she'd closed the door before she got back in the truck and drove.

Part Four: The Right Thing

The third community had already done the work.

Ace found them in a rural community center—a building that had once been a one-room schoolhouse—gathered in the afternoon light that came through tall windows. There were maybe twenty people, ranging from teenagers to people in their seventies. They had already burned their copies.

A man stepped forward, early sixties, calloused hands. “We did it ourselves. Something happened during a reading session about ten days ago. The words started moving. A woman—Sarah, she's not here today—she passed out while we were reading. Just fell over. We carried her out, called the ambulance. They said she was fine, just fainted, but she knew something was wrong. She told us something was wrong with the text.”

“So we burned them,” another voice said. A younger woman. “All of them. Every copy we could find. Some people weren't happy about it. But something bad was in those books and we knew it.”

Ace looked at them. They looked back—haunted slightly, with the particular expression of people who had come close to something terrible and only partially understood what it was. They had acted on instinct. They had been right.

“Good,” Ace said. It was the most she'd said in any of these locations.

She stayed long enough to verify that they'd burned everything. They had. She left them to their reckoning and drove.

Part Five: The Back Room

The last community she needed to visit was a remote commune—forty acres, a cluster of buildings, maybe thirty people living in what looked like a carefully maintained experiment in cooperative living. Ace arrived in the early evening, and a man met her in the driveway before she'd fully come to a stop.

He knew who she was immediately. Knew what she'd come to do. He was younger than her, probably early thirties, with the kind of worn look that came from working land that didn't want to be worked.

“We have five copies,” he said. “We received the text about twelve years ago. We kept them in a back room. We can burn them whenever you need.”

Ace said nothing. She let him lead her through the compound, past buildings with solar panels and gardens, past the structures of a life trying to be lived differently. The back room was small, attached to what looked like a library or study space. The copies of the founding text were there, stacked neatly on a shelf beside farming journals and books about sustainable agriculture.

Ace began pulling them down. The man helped. But as they cleared the shelf, Ace felt something—a slight pressure in the air, a wrongness that was almost physical. She ran her hands along the back of the shelf, and her fingers caught on something. Paper. Thin. Stuck to the wood with something that had dried.

She carefully pulled it free.

A single sheet. Old. The paper had yellowed slightly, and the handwriting on it was precise, controlled, the kind of handwriting that belonged to someone who understood the weight of what they were writing. Ace recognized the handwriting before she consciously registered that she was reading it.

The Watcher.

The note contained exactly two things: an address and a date. The date was two weeks from now. There was no other text. No explanation. No instruction. No indication of what the address was or why she should go there.

Ace stood in the back room of this remote commune, holding a note that should not have existed here, should not have been possible to place here, and felt the ground beneath her understanding shift slightly.

The Watcher had been here. Specifically here, among the books of this community. It had known that Ace would come to this location. It had left this for her here, deliberately, as a message and an invitation and a demand that she choose.

She folded the note carefully and put it in the inside pocket of her jacket, against her ribs, where she could feel it moving with her breathing.

“Everything all right?” the man asked.

Ace didn't answer. She finished gathering the texts and took them outside to the fire. The burning took longer this time—the covers were thicker, or maybe she was just burning them slower, giving herself time to process what the note meant. What it had cost the Watcher to leave it there. What it was asking of her.

When the last ash had cooled, she drove.

Part Six: The Offer

The roads at night were empty. She drove and held the weight of the note in her jacket pocket and didn't consciously decide anything. Decisions happened somewhere beneath the level of her awareness. Somewhere in the tissue of her understanding, she was already moving toward the address.

It took three days of driving. The address was in the mountains—a region she'd been to only once before, years ago, when a hunt had taken her to the high elevation scrub where very little lived and fewer things died. The landscape was patient and hostile in equal measure. The roads got smaller as she drove deeper into it.

At some point in the first night of driving, she realized she had already chosen. The choice was in her trajectory. The choice was in the kilometers she was covering, in the route she'd set without consciously acknowledging that she was setting it. The Watcher had sent a note with an address and a date, and Ace was driving toward both.

She had two weeks. She would use them to reach this location, to scout it, to understand what she was walking into. She would spend those two weeks in motion, in the silence of the truck, carrying a note in her jacket that felt like it weighed more than paper should weigh.

The last copy of the founding text had burned in ashes behind a remote commune. The Sentence Demon was dead. The network of communities was broken, scattered, left to grieve the faith they'd built on language that had fed a presence they'd never understood.

Ahead of her, two weeks distant, the invitation waited.

Ace drove toward it through the night and didn't look back.

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