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## Chapter 10: Pressure Spike

<!-- Word count: ~5,200 | Target: 5,200 | Anchor: The room under attack—Shammy's atmospheric pressure spiking, Mai's disruptor pistol overclocking, Ace's katanas drawn and humming. The triad functioning as a unit for the first time since the letter arrived. -> <!-- Emotional Surprise: The attack isn't random. It's targeted at Vera—and the attackers use symbols Ace's fragment memory recognizes from the Blood-Rift. The cult knows Vera. The cult wants her back. -> <!-- POV: Shammy | Structural Approach: Action Sequence ->

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The atmospheric pressure changed before anything else.

Shammy felt it first. The shift. The wrongness. Something moving through the pressure system. Something that didn't belong.

The room was quiet. Mai running scenarios. Ace still. Vera at the threshold, fingers brushing the doorframe.

Then the pressure spiked.

“Something's coming.” Shammy's voice cut through. “Atmospheric pressure is wrong. Something's moving.”

The first attacker came through the window.

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Glass. Movement. Shadow. Three figures in black. Void-pattern symbols glowing at their edges.

The symbols Ace's fragment recognized.

The Blood-Rift. The cult. The thing that destroyed everything.

Ace's katanas were drawn before Shammy could move. Emerald glow pulsed. Shadow-pressure pushed outward. First attacker thrown back.

Mai's disruptor pistol overclocked. Rune-markings flared blue. Two shots. Precise. Second attacker staggered.

Shammy's atmospheric pressure spiked. Room compressed. Third attacker pushed against the wall. Held.

But there were more. More figures. More void-pattern symbols. More wrongness at the edges.

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The triad moved. Wordless. The movement they'd built through years of fighting together.

Ace's depth-pressure disrupted. Katanas humming at the frequency of tension. Shadow-pressure pulled. Attackers lost their footing.

Mai's horizontal analysis guided. "Three more. Left flank. They're targeting Vera."

"Vera." Flat. "They're targeting Vera."

Shammy's vertical truth aligned. The pressure told her everything. The attackers weren't aiming for the triad. Not for Ace.

They were aiming for the woman at the threshold. The woman with the wrong edges. The woman who might be a sister or a construct.

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Vera moved. Not trained. Not practiced. But the threshold touch had grounded her. The controlled delivery had prepared her. She reached for the doorframe.

Then her hands did something Shammy didn't expect.

The void-pattern symbols on the attackers pulsed. The same symbols Ace's fragment recognized. The same wrongness.

And Vera's hands responded. Her edges flickered. The atmospheric pressure around her shifted. Wrong. Adjacent. Made.

She pushed outward. Not shadow-pressure. Not atmospheric. Something else. Something that matched the attackers' symbols.

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"Her edges." Direct. "She's activating. Something's changing."

The attackers' symbols flared. Void-pattern intensified. The room filled with pressure that wasn't atmospheric. Wasn't shadow. Was something else.

"I don't..." Cracking. "I didn't know I could do that."

"Later." Katanas humming. "Focus. The room. Three more."

The triad moved. Ace's shadow-pressure disrupted formation. Mai's disruptor pistol overclocked again. Shammy's atmospheric pressure contained the edges.

But the attackers kept coming. Kept aiming for Vera.

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The symbols. The void-pattern. The Blood-Rift.

Ace's fragment recognized it. The memory that wasn't hers. The transmission from someone else's death.

Burning hair. The screaming. The reaching hand. And the symbols. The symbols the cult used. The symbols that destroyed everything.

"The Blood-Rift." Flat. "The symbols are from the Blood-Rift. The cult that destroyed everything."

"The Cult of the First Voice." Clicked. "They're the ones who destroyed your village. They built her."

"They want her back." Shammy's pressure spiked. "They're not trying to kill her. They're trying to retrieve her."

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The attackers' formation changed. Not assault. Containment. Surrounding Vera. Not Ace. Not Mai. Not Shammy.

Vera.

The woman who might be a sister. Might be a construct. The woman with the wrong edges.

"They made her." Fragment pulsed. Memory transmission intensified. "The symbols. The void-pattern. They're connected to her."

"She was built by them." Framework ran. "The cult. The First Voice. Built from the real Vera's memories."

"And now they want her back." Pressure compressed. "But she's developed something they didn't expect. Autonomy. Consciousness. Something they can't control."

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The fight intensified. Triad's movements wordless. Practiced. Years of fighting together.

Ace's shadow-pressure disrupted. Mai's analysis guided. Shammy's atmospheric pressure contained.

But the attackers kept coming. Kept aiming for Vera.

Vera fought back. Not trained. Not practiced. But something in her responded. Edges flickered. Wrongness activated. She pushed outward with something that wasn't shadow-pressure. Wasn't atmospheric.

Something that matched the attackers' symbols.

"You have their abilities." Framework running. "The void-pattern. You're connected to them."

"I don't know how." Cracking. "I didn't know I could—"

"Later." Katanas humming. "Focus. The room. The pressure. We need to move."

Shammy felt it before it happened. Pressure spiked. Wrongness intensified. Attackers' formation changed.

"Something's coming." Direct. "The pressure is wrong. More of them. Outside. Coming."

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The triad moved. Not retreat. Not surrender. Regrouping.

"Can't hold this position." Mai's disruptor pistol overheating. "Too many. Targeting Vera. We need to move."

"Vera. Stay close." Shadow-pressure stabilized. "Shammy. Cover the exits. Mai. Analysis."

Wordless. Practiced. The formation they'd built through years of fighting together.

Shammy's atmospheric pressure covered the rear. Mai's analysis guided the path. Ace's shadow-pressure disrupted pursuit.

Vera in the center. The target. The woman with the wrong edges. The thing the cult wanted back.

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The attackers didn't follow. Not into the streets. Not into the open.

But Shammy could feel them. Wrongness at the edges. Void-pattern symbols. Pressure that wasn't atmospheric.

"Regrouping." Atmospheric sense extended. "Not retreating. They'll come again."

"They want her." Fragment pulsed. "Want her back. They made her. And she developed something they can't control."

"Autonomy." Clicked. "Consciousness. The ability to choose. She wasn't supposed to develop that. She was supposed to be a tool. A lure."

"And now she's something else." Steady. "Something they didn't predict. Something they can't use."

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Vera's control didn't rebuild. Threshold touch activated. Fingers found the doorframe of the building they'd taken shelter in. Grounding. Grounding.

"I didn't know." Cracked. "I didn't know I could do that. I didn't know I was connected to them."

"You were built by them." Pressing. "From the real Vera's memories. You have their symbols. Their void-pattern. You're connected to the cult."

"But I'm not—" Breaking. "I'm not one of them. I'm not their weapon."

"You're something else." Shadow-pressure stabilized. "Something they made. And something you became."

Vera's fingers touched the doorframe. Grounding. Control tried to rebuild.

"I don't want to be what they made me." Quiet. "I want to be who I chose to be."

The triad stood together. First time since the letter arrived. First time since the blood question split them apart.

Ace's shadow-pressure stabilized. Mai's analysis ran. Shammy's atmospheric pressure covered.

And Vera stood in the center. The target. The woman with the wrong edges. The thing the cult wanted back.

"They'll come again." Warm. "The pressure is wrong. Something's moving. They're regrouping."

"We need to be ready." Mai's disruptor pistol cooled. "We need to find out what they want. Why they built her. Why they want her back."

"They want her back because she developed something they can't control." Fragment pulsed. "Autonomy. Consciousness. The ability to choose."

"Which means she's dangerous to them." Steady. "Something they didn't predict. Something they can't use."

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The triad stood together. Blood or no blood. Found family or no found family.

Storm was coming. Cult was coming. Truth about Vera was coming.

Shammy's atmospheric pressure filled the room. Vertical truth aligned. Core question answered.

Not blood. Not origin. Not fragment.

The triad stood together.

The pressure spike had passed. But more were coming. The storm was building.

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<!-- END CHAPTER 10 -->

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Last update: **23/04/2026 16:18**

