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Chapter 4: Home Frequency

The apartment was quiet. The kind of quiet that happens when the people in it have decided that tonight is not the night for whatever's waiting outside.

Ace sat on the floor next to Mai's data station, her back against the wall, her katanas within arm's reach. She wasn't reading screens. She was reading Mai, which was a more complex data set and one she found more interesting. Mai's silver hair caught the monitor light. Her fingers moved across three data streams with the precision of someone who thought in frameworks. The faint runic reflection in her hair shifted with each screen change, and Ace watched it the way other people watch fire.

"You're staring," Mai said without looking up.

"Observing."

"The distinction being?"

"Staring implies I'm not also cataloguing the exits, monitoring the building's power fluctuations, and tracking your respiration rate for signs of fatigue."

Mai's mouth did the thing it did when she was trying not to be pleased. "My respiration rate is fine."

"Fourteen breaths per minute. Elevated. You've been at this for six hours."

"Six hours is a warm-up." Mai pulled up another screen. "The seal data from the Harbor district is fascinating. The geometric structure uses a modular containment design that I've only seen in pre-Consolidation ritual architecture. The modular approach means individual sections can be maintained independently, which is clever if you're planning for long-term degradation. Whoever designed this expected the seal to degrade and built in redundancy."

"You admire it."

"The architecture, yes. The containment of something that's been breathing for three centuries, less so. But the design is elegant. Symmetrical. Almost mathematically beautiful, if you ignore what it's containing."

Ace processed this. In her world, admiration was a form of attention, and Mai's attention was the most valuable resource in the apartment. If Mai admired the seal's architecture, she was engaging with it. Engagement meant investment. Investment meant Mai was already committed to solving this, which meant they were going deeper.

"Symmetrical," Ace repeated.

"The containment vectors are balanced. Four primary anchor points, each reinforcing the others. Remove one and the remaining three compensate. Remove two and the structure degrades but doesn't collapse. It's over-engineered. Whoever built this wanted it to survive partial failure."

“Partial failure like what happened at the village.”

Mai's hands paused. A small thing. Ace caught it. Mai's pauses were data points. This one meant she was recalibrating—choosing between the analytical path and the personal one.

“The village seal was simpler,” Mai said carefully. “Three anchor points, no redundancy. When one failed, the structure collapsed. The design philosophy here is different. This seal was built to last, or at least to survive. Which raises the question of why it's degrading at all.”

“Maintenance failure.”

“Possibly. Or design limitation. A seal this old was built with the knowledge available at the time. The materials degrade. The mathematics might have gaps that only show up over centuries. The original architects might not have anticipated how long the seal would need to hold.” Mai leaned back. “Or the degradation is intentional.”

“Intentional?”

“A seal that degrades slowly enough to require maintenance but fast enough to eventually fail. It creates a dependency. The cult, or whoever's maintaining it, becomes necessary. They can't leave. They can't stop. The seal becomes their purpose, and the entity becomes their reason for existing.” Mai's silver-blue eyes held a thought that was still forming. “It's not containment. It's a relationship.”

The word sat between them. Relationship. Mai used it in the structural sense: the way components interact within a system. But the word had other meanings, and in the quiet of the apartment, with the rain on the windows and the neon flickering outside, those other meanings were louder than the structural definition.

Ace shifted. Not toward Mai. Toward the kitchen. She moved in that economy-of-motion way that made her presence a form of punctuation. She was making tea. The steam rose from the kettle and the smell of it was clean and ordinary—nothing like burning rice—and Ace let the ordinariness wash over her before she brought Mai's cup back.

“Thank you,” Mai said. She didn't look up from her screens, but her hand found the cup and wrapped around it. Automatic. The gesture was automatic, and that was the point. Mai didn't have to think about where Ace would be. Ace was always where Mai needed her to be.

“The ritual patterns,” Ace said, settling back against the wall. “You said they were aesthetically offensive.”

“I said the ritual patterns in the tip data were aesthetically offensive. The purchase orders suggest a ceremony structure that breaks mathematical symmetry. The salt boundaries are offset by 3.7 degrees from the containment vectors, which means either the cult is incompetent or the ceremony isn't what I think it is.”

“You want to fix it.”

“I want to understand it. Fixing is a consequence of understanding.”

Ace's mouth did something that was almost a smile. “You want to fix it.”

“The asymmetry offends me on a structural level, yes.” Mai finally looked at her. “Don't tell me you haven't noticed the exit route configuration in the tip data. The primary evacuation path routes

through the seal chamber, which is the worst possible design if you're trying to escape a containment breach.”

“I noticed.”

“Of course you did.” Mai's hand left the tea cup and found Ace's shoulder. No words. Just presence. Ace let it happen. She didn't lean into it. She didn't move away either.

Above them, on the roof, Shammy was reading the sky. Ace could feel her atmospheric regulation through the ceiling—a gentle pressure that made the apartment's air feel like the eye of a storm. Shammy held the space for them. That was her vector. Vertical. The rising column that kept the other two anchored.

“Shammy's been on the roof for three hours,” Mai said.

“She needs the sky.”

“I know. But she also needs to sleep.”

“She's regulating.”

Mai's hand tightened fractionally on Ace's shoulder. “I know. She's been regulating since we got back from the Harbor district. The apartment's atmosphere is so stable I could measure it with a teaspoon. She's holding the space for us because the Harbor district frightened her.”

“The Harbor district made her redundant.”

“Which is worse than frightening. Being afraid you can manage. Being useless in your primary function is a different kind of threat.” Mai pulled her hand back and returned to her screens. “I'll talk to her later. Or you will. Or we'll both go up and she'll pretend she was about to come down anyway and we'll pretend to believe her.”

“She does that.”

“She does. It's her version of not needing help. She holds the space for everyone else and pretends she doesn't need anyone to hold it for her.” Mai's voice had shifted. Softer. Less analytical. “The triad works because all three vectors are active. When one vector goes defensive, the field destabilizes. I can't have Shammy white-knuckling the atmosphere for the next week because she's afraid of what's in the Harbor district.”

“She's not afraid of what's in the Harbor district.”

“No?”

“She's afraid of what it means that something else can do her job better than she can.”

Mai looked at Ace for a long moment. That was the kind of distinction Ace made—fear of the thing and fear of what the thing means were different fears, and the solutions were different too.

“You're right,” Mai said. “Which means the solution isn't reassurance about the entity. It's about her value.”

“She already knows her value. She doesn't know how to need the value she doesn't provide.”

“That’s... very precise, Ace.”

“Learned from you.”

“No, you didn’t. That’s not my framework. That’s yours.” Mai’s silver-blue eyes held something warmer than analysis. “You see the structural weaknesses in people the way you see exits. You just don’t usually articulate them.”

Ace didn’t respond. She drank her tea and watched the rain on the windows and let the silence be what it was. Not awkward. Not heavy. Just present.

The apartment hummed at its nighttime frequency. The data screens flickered with seal schematics and atmospheric readings. The rain hit the windows and split into frequencies nobody else was counting. Above them, Shammy held the atmosphere in a regulation pattern so gentle it was almost invisible. Which was the sign that she was working the hardest, because Shammy’s regulation was supposed to feel like nothing at all, and when it felt like nothing, she was giving everything.

Ace’s shadow-pressure shifted. A small fluctuation. Mai noticed before Ace did, which was unusual. The air in the apartment thickened fractionally, then thinned. A pulse. Two pulses.

Violet.

The fragment stirred. Not as threat. Not as warning. As recognition. Something in the seal data on Mai’s screens had triggered a resonance, and Violet was responding to it the way a tuning fork responds to a matching frequency.

Ace went still. Not her combat stillness, which was coiled and ready. A different stillness. A listening stillness. Her violet eyes dimmed slightly, then brightened, then dimmed again—the prismatic shimmer cycling through a pattern Mai had learned to read as Violet’s presence shifting between passive and active.

“Ace.”

“I’m fine.” Standard deflection. Mai let it stand. The fragment had stirred and settled. The shadow-pressure normalized. The apartment’s atmosphere returned to its Shammy-regulated baseline.

But Ace had felt something. Something that lived in the architecture of the seal, that recognized her fragment, that knew her name. Not today. Not yet. But something down there was aware that she existed, and it was patient, and it had been patient for a very long time.

“I need to get inside that warehouse,” Mai said, returning to her screens. The moment had passed. The data remained. “The tip data and Whisper’s information give us the external picture, but the seal’s architecture can only be understood from inside. We need someone who reads ritual structure, and I’m the best candidate, but even I can’t do a full analysis from exterior observation.”

“Kessler,” Ace said.

Mai’s fingers paused. “Kessler lives in Night City. Former Foundation ritual architect. Left after a containment breach in Jakarta. She’s bitter, paranoid, and she hates me.”

“Hates you?”

“Professional history. I published a paper that identified a flaw in one of her containment designs. The

flaw was real. The containment breach in Jakarta was partly caused by it. She took it personally.”

“You were right.”

“I was right. She was wrong. People don't always forgive you for being right, especially when being wrong cost lives.” Mai pulled up a Night City contact database. “Kessler runs a consulting practice out of a dive bar in the Chrome District. She helps people who can't go through official channels with ritual-architecture problems. She's expensive, she's difficult, and she'll probably refuse to help us.”

“But she knows the seal.”

“She knows every seal design in the Foundation archive. If the Harbor district seal is in there, she'll recognize it. If it's not, she'll know who to ask.” Mai closed the database. “I'll contact her tomorrow. She'll say no. I'll go anyway. She'll be angry. I'll buy her a drink. She'll refuse. I'll buy her two drinks. She'll talk to me.”

“You've done this before.”

“Twice. Both times she eventually helped. Both times she hated every minute of it. Both times she was right to hate it, because the work was dangerous and she'd already lost people to containment breaches.” Mai stood. Her joints cracked from six hours of sitting. “Get some actual sleep, Ace. Tomorrow we visit the Chrome District and I have an awkward conversation with someone who'd rather see me walk into a containment field than buy me a drink.”

Ace didn't move. Mai collected her data tablets and headed for the bedroom. At the door, she paused.

“Ace. Violet. What did you feel?”

Ace considered the question. Violet was a resonance, not a passenger. It didn't speak in words. It spoke in pressure and recognition and the feeling of encountering something that had been waiting for you to show up.

“Home,” Ace said. “It felt like home.”

Mai held her gaze for a moment. Then she nodded, once, and went to bed. She didn't push. She never pushed. She left the door open and the light on, which was her version of an invitation, and Ace would close it when she was ready, or she wouldn't, and either way the space was there.

Ace sat in the quiet apartment and listened to the city's frequencies. 50Hz. 60Hz. Oscillation. The Harbor district held its line. The rain kept falling. The neon kept flickering.

Above her, Shammy's atmospheric regulation held the apartment in a calm that was hard-won and carefully maintained. Below her, Mai was already asleep, because Mai could sleep anywhere and at any time, which was a skill Ace had never mastered and envied without admitting it.

And inside her, Violet stirred one more time. A faint pulse of recognition directed at something deep below the streets of the Harbor district. Something that had been waiting for a very long time. Something that breathed at 50Hz—the same frequency as her katanas, the same frequency as the seal that had failed at her village, the same frequency as the thing that had made her what she was.

Ace filed the data. It was irrelevant.

She filed it anyway.

The rain came down. The neon flickered. The triad slept, or didn't, in their apartment forty floors above Night City, while twelve blocks away, something ancient held the air still and breathed once every eight seconds.

It had been waiting for a very long time.

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