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Chapter 10: The Burning Manuscript

The fire-entity was inside her now.

Not in the way Violet was inside her. Violet was coherent. Integrated. A presence that had learned to communicate over years of binding. The burning Fragment was different. Rawer. Less structured. It sat in the void space her shadow-pressure created like a coal that wouldn't stop smoldering. Heat without flame. Want without shape.

Ace could feel it. Not just Violet. The burning Fragment too. Two pieces of the Scattered. Coexisting. The weight was different. Uneven, pulling in directions she couldn't predict. Violet sat in her consciousness like a familiar presence, something she'd learned to carry, something that had become part of her architecture. The burning Fragment pushed. It wanted more space. Reached for Violet's territory, tested the boundaries, pressed against her shadow-pressure like a flame seeking fuel.

She stood in the monastery's empty courtyard. The air was still dead. Shammy had mentioned that. But Ace's pressure was filling the gaps. The void where the air didn't move. Where nothing had breathed for decades.

Copper. Burning copper. The smell hit her without warning.

Not the monastery. Not the fire. Older. Her village. The night everything ended.

She pushed it down. The smell wasn't real. It was memory. Her Fragment-suppressed memory bleeding through. The burning Fragment was agitating something. Pulling at Violet's resonance. Drawing things to the surface. Things she'd buried. Things she couldn't afford to see.

Not now. Not in the field. Not when the triad needed her to hold.

You're still here. Violet's presence pressed against her consciousness. Not words exactly. More like pressure. Recognition. A warmth that wasn't warmth. Violet didn't do warmth. *You're still holding.*

I'm holding. Fluctuating. Expanded. Contracted. *For now.*

The burning one is learning. Shifting. *It's learning to coexist. But it takes space. It takes energy.*

I know. The mechanical bird kept ticking. *I can feel it.*

The burning one is grateful. Quieter now. *It's been alone for so long. It doesn't know how to be anything else.*

Can you help it?

We can try. Violet's presence expanded. Not against Ace's consciousness but around it. Making space. *We're all pieces of the same whole. Maybe we can teach it. Show it how to be part of something.*

The clockwork sparrow ticked in her palm. Wind and unwind. The familiar motion grounded her. She

didn't remember reaching for it. Her hands had found it on their own.

The bird's wings were brass. Tiny gears. She'd found it in a market in Prague two years ago. A vendor who didn't know what he had. A wind-up toy that someone had crafted with obsessive precision. She'd bought it without thinking. Fixed its mechanism in her quarters that night. Wound it. Watched it move. The only thing she owned that served no operational purpose.

She wound it again now. The ticking grounded her. The gears turned. The weight in her shadow-space pressed against her ribs.

Two Fragments. Two weights. One vessel.

She wound the bird again. Wound. Unwound. The rhythm was the only thing that made sense. The only thing that didn't require calculation or analysis.

Mai watched Ace from across the courtyard. The shadow-pressure was visible now, not as darkness, but as absence. The light bent around Ace differently. The space compressed where she stood. That was the void-weight. The shadow-pressure that pushed reality aside.

But something was different. The compression was uneven. Fluctuating. As if the void itself was struggling to hold its shape.

"You're destabilizing." Mai's tablet traced the containment architecture, reading the patterns in Ace's shadow-pressure. "The structure is fluctuating. Your shadow-pressure was designed for one Fragment. Two is pushing the limits."

"I know." Flat. The shortest sentences. Mai had learned to read them over years of working together. The flatter the voice, the more she was carrying. The shorter the sentences, the more she was holding inside. "I can feel it."

"The burning Fragment is less coherent." Mai's pattern-tracing intensified. Her fingers moved across the screen, then the tablet's surface, then her own palm. The tracing habit. Her hands solving problems her mind hadn't finished with yet. Circle. Circle. Interlock. "It's not integrated like Violet. It's just there. Taking up space. Drawing on your reserves. The way a fire draws on oxygen."

"I know."

"The equation is changing." Mai's hand trembled. Just slightly. Just enough. The calculation was incomplete. She could feel it. The variables sliding away from her. The numbers that didn't align. "The variables are shifting. I need more data."

"Then we get more data." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "From the thief. From the manuscripts. From wherever we can."

Mai's fingers stopped tracing. She looked at her hand. The tremor had stopped. But she'd felt it. The calculation failing before she'd finished running the numbers.

Copper and static. The taste in her mouth. She recognized it now. Tokyo. The breach. The colleagues who died because she'd been three seconds too slow. The calculation that should have worked. The equation that failed.

She didn't taste copper now. But the trembling told her the same thing. The equation was breaking. She couldn't calculate without all the variables. And the variables didn't exist. No one had held two Fragments before.

Shammy approached from the monastery's inner chambers. Her warmth was thin. The dead air here affected her more than she let on. Mai could see it in the way Shammy's stormfront contracted. The atmospheric pressure that usually extended meters around her had collapsed to arm's length. In sterile spaces. In sealed environments. In places where nothing breathed.

Shammy had mentioned it once, in Prague. "The air doesn't move in places like this. It doesn't respond. I can't feel the pressure systems. I can't sense what's coming."

Flat. Unemotional. Not like Shammy at all.

Mai had catalogued it. Environmental suppression affects Shammy's atmospheric sense. Add to operational parameters. Avoid sealed environments when possible.

But they couldn't avoid this. The Vatican was sealed. The archives were climate-controlled. The more they dug into this investigation, the more sterile spaces they'd have to enter.

"The fire was contained." Shammy's voice was careful. "But the thief left something behind. Not just the Fragment."

She held out a page. Not manuscript paper. Something newer. Printer paper, maybe. The edges were singed. The paper was old but the burn marks were new. Fire without fuel. The residue of the Fragment's presence.

Mai took it. Her fingers traced the pattern on the surface. Not writing. A signature. The same pattern she'd found in the Vatican archives. The same containment architecture. The same void-weight.

"The thief was here." Mai traced the signature. "The pattern is identical. They came for the Catalogue. They found it. They destroyed it."

"And they couldn't destroy the Fragment." Shammy's hair lifted slightly. Her atmospheric sense was returning in Mai's presence. Something about the way Mai's cold-focus aura stabilized local fields. The way Shammy's presence warmed the air around Mai. They worked together. Always had. "So they left it."

"Not for us." Mai worked the patterns. "The thief's signature shows containment attempts. Multiple patterns. They tried to contain the Fragment. They couldn't. So they moved on."

"They're not all-powerful." Shammy's warmth sharpened. "They have limits."

"Neither could we." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "Not really. We absorbed it. That's not the same as handling it."

"Absorbed it into you." Mai's hand trembled again. She pressed it flat against the tablet. "The math is still unstable. Two Fragments in one host. The survival rate for one Fragment release is already low. Two Fragments—"

"Unknown." Ace finished the sentence. "I know."

The monastery had been a containment site. For Fragment hosts. For Silent Vessels. The Vatican had studied them. Tested them. Made them.

Now it was empty.

But the thief's trail remained.

Mai walked through the inner chambers. The containment architecture was old, older than Foundation standard. But the principles were the same. Wards built into the stone. Suppression fields embedded in the floor. The Vatican had been doing this for centuries. Long before the Foundation existed. Long before the classification systems. Long before the protocols.

She traced each pattern. Catalogued each signature. Her tablet hummed with data. But her mind was elsewhere.

Two Fragments in one host. The equation didn't solve.

She'd run the numbers fourteen times since they left the fire chamber. Fourteen different approaches. Fourteen different ways to calculate the survival probability. Each time, the result was the same: insufficient data. The variables didn't exist.

The containment cells lined the corridor. Small. Windowless. Each one designed to hold a person. A Silent Vessel. Someone like Ace.

Mai stopped at one of the cells. Iron door. Cross welded into the center. Rusted but still cold. The observation window was small. Just wide enough to see inside. Just narrow enough to prevent escape.

She'd seen containment cells before. Foundation standard. But this was different. The Vatican hadn't been studying anomalies. They'd been studying people.

Her fingers traced the pattern on the wall. The signature was clear now. The thief had been here. Had tried to contain the Fragment. Had failed.

Mai's hand trembled again. She pressed it flat.

The thief was like Ace. Another Silent Vessel. Another host. That was why the signature was familiar. Not Foundation-standard. Fragment-host-standard. The same containment architecture. The same shadow-pressure residue. The same void-weight.

The thief had survived their Blood-Moon Event too. The thief had released their Fragment. The thief was still alive.

That was the variable she needed. The survival rate. The method.

Her mind was already running the numbers. The equation might not solve. But it could be approximated. If she had the thief's data. If she could see what they'd done.

Shammy stood in the courtyard. The air was dead here. No movement. No breath. The stagnation pressed against her like a weight. She couldn't feel the wind. Couldn't sense the pressure systems.

The last time she'd felt this cut off was in the Foundation's arctic research station. Three weeks in a sealed environment. Climate-controlled. Filtered air. No storms. No wind. No weather at all. By the end, she'd been half-convinced she was dissolving. Becoming less real. The air didn't know her there. The pressure systems didn't respond to her presence.

She'd told Mai once, in Tokyo. "When I can't feel the air, I can't feel myself." The way Mai had looked at her. Analytical but not cold. Mai calculated everything, but she calculated for her team. For Shammy. For Ace.

The air here was like that. Dead. Sterile.

But she could see Ace. The shadow-pressure that filled the space. The void that Ace carried inside her, now filled with two weights instead of one.

The clockwork sparrow ticked steadily. Shammy could hear it from across the courtyard. The rhythm. Wind and unwind.

The bird was a toy. Shammy knew that. She'd watched Ace fix it in Prague, years ago. The tiny gears. The brass wings. It served no operational purpose. But Ace carried it everywhere. Wound it constantly. The only thing she owned that wasn't a weapon.

Shammy had asked about it once. Ace had said four words: "It keeps ticking."

That was all.

Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out. The air was dead. But she could feel the shift. The way Ace's shadow-pressure was pushing against the stagnation. Making space. Filling the void.

The pressure was wrong, though. Not wrong like the thief. Wrong like too much. Like a container filled past capacity.

Shammy moved closer. Her warmth extended. Not just atmospheric, but personal.

"Little shadow." Soft. "You can't hold everything."

Ace didn't look at her. The mechanical bird kept ticking. "I know."

"Then let us help you carry it."

The void expanded. Contracted. Expanded again.

"You are helping." Flat. But her hand found Shammy's arm. Brief. *I hear you. I see you. I'm still here.*

Shammy's warmth settled. Not the atmospheric kind. The personal kind. The kind that came from being present.

"You're not alone in this." Soft. "You don't have to hold everything by yourself."

"The Fragments are inside me." Flat. "I'm the only one who can hold them."

"That's not what I mean." Shammy's hair lifted slightly. The atmospheric sense was coming back. The dead air was responding to Ace's shadow-pressure. "I mean you don't have to carry the weight of what it means. Mai's calculating. I'm feeling. You're holding. We're a triad. That's how it works."

Ace's mechanical bird stopped ticking. The gears went still.

"Three vectors." Quiet. "One lock."

"Exactly." Shammy's warmth extended. "You hold. We carry. Together."

The burning Fragment was quieter now. Not silent. But less chaotic. Violet's presence had spread around it. Containing not by force, but by proximity. Showing the Fragment that proximity didn't have to mean conflict.

Ace felt the exchange. Not words exactly. Pressure. Emotion. The shape of communication that Fragments used. Strange. But not unfamiliar. Violet had spoken to her like this for years. Now there was another voice. Another presence. Two weights in the void.

Why do you stay? The burning Fragment asked. Softer now. *Why don't you burn through her?*

Because burning isn't the only way to be. Steady. I was scattered once too. Alone. Burning. Someone held me. Not controlled. Held. I learned that holding is different from consuming.

What's the difference?

Choice. Shifting. When you consume, you take. When you hold, you share. She holds us. We don't take her. That's the difference.

I don't know how to share. Thin. Quiet. I've been burning for so long.

You don't have to know how. Patient. You just have to try. We'll help you figure out the rest.

Why?

Because being scattered is lonely. Expanding. Because we're all pieces of something that was broken. And pieces want to be whole.

What if I pull you apart?

Then we figure it out together. Quiet. That's what being whole means.

The burning Fragment was silent for a moment.

I've been burning for decades. I don't remember what cold feels like.

Violet's presence wrapped around the burning Fragment. Not consuming. Not controlling. Just holding.

You'll remember. We'll teach you.

What if I burn you instead?

Then I'll burn. Calm. I've been burned before. Being scattered means being burned. Being alone. Wanting connection so badly that you'll burn anything that touches you. I know what that's like.

You're not afraid?

I'm tired of being alone. Expanding. Aren't you?

The burning Fragment didn't answer. But Ace felt the shift. The pressure. The weight. Two Fragments now. Not fighting. Learning to coexist.

She didn't know if she could hold them both. But she was holding them now.

That was enough. For now.

Mai sat on a stone bench in the courtyard. Her tablet was dark. Her fingers traced patterns on her palm instead.

"The equation doesn't solve." Thin. The tremor was still there. "Two Fragments in one host. The variables don't align. The survival rate for one Fragment release is already uncertain. Two Fragments—"

"Mai." Flat. But Mai heard the shift. *I hear you. I see the calculation. I know the risk.*

"I'm not saying we can't do it." Pattern-tracing continued. "I'm saying I don't have the data. I need more variables. I need to know how the thief survived their release. I need to know the method."

"Then we find the thief." Expanding. "And we ask."

Shammy sat beside Mai. Not touching. But present. Her warmth extended.

"The air is different now." Soft. "In the monastery. It's responding to Ace. The dead spaces are coming alive."

"Two Fragments in one host." Mai worked through the patterns. "The pressure is creating equilibrium. But—"

"Temporary." Ace finished. "I know. You keep saying that."

"I keep saying it because it's true." Mai's hand pressed flat against her thigh. The trembling stopped. "The temporary nature doesn't change. It just extends. You're borrowing time."

"Then we use the time we have." Settled. "We find the thief. We learn the release. We decide what to do."

The triad. Together. Even with the weight.

The triad prepared to leave the monastery. The fire was absorbed. The Fragment was inside Ace. The trail led to the Vatican.

"The thief is going to the Vatican next." Mai's tablet showed the pattern. The signature. The trajectory. "The Silence Protocol. The remaining manuscripts. They're burning everything."

"Then we go to the Vatican." Shammy's warmth settled. "We find them. We learn what they know."

"We ask them about release." Expanding. "The survival rate. The method. We need that information."

“And if they won't share?”

The clockwork sparrow ticked in her palm. Wind and unwind. Her hand closed around it.

“Then we take it.” Flat. “I'm holding two Fragments now. I don't have time for negotiation. I need to know what happens if I release them.”

“Two Fragments.” Mai's hand trembled. She pressed it flat. “The calculation is changing. The variables are shifting. I need more data.”

“Then we get more data.” Settled. “From the thief. From the manuscripts. From wherever we can.”

The monastery was behind them. The fire was inside Ace. The weight was pulling.

But the triad was still together. Three vectors. One lock.

The thief was out there. Burning the knowledge. Destroying the manuscripts. Leaving the Fragments for others to find.

And the hunter was still coming. Tracking the Fragment resonance. Finding the pieces one by one.

The more Ace held, the brighter the signal. The faster the hunter would find them.

Mai's tablet showed the trajectory. The path from Rome. The distance to the Vatican.

“Shammy.” Working the calculations. “The atmospheric pressure differential. Can you feel the thief's trail?”

Shammy's hair lifted slightly. Her atmospheric sense reached out. The air currents. The pressure systems. The weight of passage.

“There's a trail.” Thin. “Someone moved through here recently. The air remembers. They were heading southeast.”

“Toward Rome.” Mai traced the pattern. “Toward the Vatican.”

“Then we follow.” Expanding. “We find them. We learn. Then we decide.”

But for now, they had a direction. The Vatican. The Silence Protocol. The thief.

And somewhere in all of it, the answer to the question that mattered most:

What happens when you release?

END OF CHAPTER TEN

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