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Chapter 17: The Vatican Decides

The clockwork sparrow in Ace's palm was ticking. Wind and unwind. The familiar rhythm.

She wasn't winding it. She was just holding. The rhythm of tension and release. The only thing she could control.

Two Fragments. One host. The hunter coming. The triad holding.

Thread A: The Foundation

Dr. Bright stood in the Foundation's Rome field office, the secure line open to Vatican City. The connection was encrypted, routed through three intermediary servers, and still felt like speaking into a canyon. The Vatican's internal politics operated on frequencies that the Foundation's procedural manuals didn't capture.

“Cardinal-Adjutant Mendez.” Bright's voice was professional. Clipped. “The Foundation appreciates the Church's cooperation in this matter.”

“The Church has not yet determined the extent of its cooperation.” The voice on the other end was older. Measured. Carrying the weight of centuries of bureaucratic precedent. “The manuscripts stolen from our archives represent a significant loss. The anomaly that took them represents a significant threat.”

“The thief is classified as a former Silent Vessel. Human-origin, with Fragment release history. Our team is tracking.”

“Your team.” A pause. “You mean the triad that entered our archives without full disclosure. The one containing the multi-Fragment host.”

Bright's jaw tightened. The Vatican had been monitoring more closely than reported. “Dr. Mai Tanaka, Shammy, and Ace. Yes. They're operating under Foundation authority.”

“Foundation authority does not supersede ecclesiastical jurisdiction in matters of spiritual containment.” Cardinal-Adjutant Mendez's voice shifted. Bright had heard this tone before. The prelude to institutional assertion. “The Codex Umbra. The Silence Protocol. The Fragment Catalogue. These are not merely 'manuscripts,' Dr. Bright. They are containment records for entities your organization has only begun to understand.”

“The Foundation has extensive documentation on Fragment-class anomalies—”

“Your documentation begins in the twentieth century.” A sharper edge now. “Ours begins in the thirteenth. We were creating Silent Vessels before your organization existed. We were containing entities before you had language to describe them.”

Bright's hand pressed against the briefing table. The Foundation's procedural manuals didn't prepare him for this. The manuals assumed Vatican cooperation. Assumed that the Church's anomaly protocols would align with Foundation containment philosophy.

They didn't.

"We're not discussing history, Cardinal. We're discussing the current operational situation. The thief—"

"The thief is not your primary concern." The interruption was smooth. Practiced. "The multi-Fragment host is. The one called Ace. She holds two entities. Our records indicate this is unprecedented."

"Her status is stable. She's functioning—"

"She is a vessel approaching capacity." The Cardinal's voice dropped. "You know what happens to Silent Vessels who absorb beyond their design. You know what the Blood-Moon Event was meant to accomplish. The ritual wasn't random, Dr. Bright. It was assembly. And your 'stable' host is now carrying two pieces of something that wants to be whole."

The secure line carried silence for three seconds.

"What is the Vatican's position?"

A longer pause. When Mendez spoke again, his voice had shifted to something less institutional. More careful.

"The Vatican is not unified in this matter. There are those who believe the Fragment hosts should be studied. Contained. That the knowledge in the manuscripts should be preserved and expanded. That the Church's duty is to understand these entities, not simply hide them."

"And the others?"

"Believe the knowledge should be destroyed. The hosts released. The cycle ended." A thin breath. "The thief shares this position. Destroy the records. Prevent more hosts from being created. End the practice that began in the thirteenth century."

Bright felt the weight of that admission. The Vatican was divided on whether to continue creating Silent Vessels. Whether the practice that had made Ace should continue.

"Where does the Vatican stand on the current situation? The triad. The thief. The multi-Fragment host."

"The official position is containment. The manuscripts must be recovered. The thief must be apprehended. The multi-Fragment host must be examined."

"Examined."

"Studied. Under Vatican supervision. With Foundation cooperation."

Bright's hand pressed harder against the table. "Ace is not a specimen. She's Foundation personnel. She's under my protection."

"She is carrying two entities that, combined, represent a significant fraction of a scattered whole. The

hunter that your records references, it is drawn to that concentration. Every day she holds them, the signal grows brighter. The Vatican's position is that she presents an existential risk."

"Her survival is my priority."

"Then you understand why containment is necessary. For her safety. For everyone's safety."

The line went quiet. Bright recognized the negotiation tactic. Leaving the implications to settle, unspoken.

"And if the Foundation refuses to hand her over?"

"Then the Vatican will act independently. We have our own containment teams. Our own protocols. Our own methods." A pause. "We would prefer cooperation, Dr. Bright. The Foundation has resources. Expertise. A history of successful containment that the Church respects. But the manuscripts contain knowledge that predates your organization by seven hundred years. The hosts that carry these entities are our responsibility. They have always been our responsibility."

"The Foundation will not release Ace to Vatican custody."

"Then we have a problem."

The line held.

"The Foundation's position," Bright said, voice heavy, "is that the triad will continue operations under Foundation authority. The thief will be located. The manuscripts will be assessed. The multi-Fragment host will remain in the field."

"Assessed."

"Some manuscripts may require destruction. That determination has not been made."

"You're telling me that the Foundation is willing to destroy containment records created over seven centuries?"

"I'm telling you that the Foundation's position is evolving. We're in the field now. We're learning. The tactical situation is informing operational philosophy."

Mendez's voice shifted again. Something like approval. Or recognition.

"The Foundation is more flexible than its reputation suggests."

"The Foundation prioritizes containment outcomes over institutional precedent."

"A position the Church has struggled with." A pause. "Cardinal Aldric leads the faction that wishes to preserve the knowledge. To continue the practice of creating Silent Vessels. He has significant influence within the Curia. His position is that the Fragment entities are not enemies to be destroyed. They are tools to be refined. Controlled. Used."

Bright felt cold. "Used."

"Your organization has its own history of weaponizing anomalies, Dr. Bright. I would not cast stones in this particular glass house."

“The Foundation's weaponization protocols are—”

“The Foundation's weaponization protocols are not my concern. My concern is the multi-Fragment host currently in Rome. My concern is the thief who is destroying records that my faction believes should be preserved.” A pause. “And my concern is the hunter that you have mentioned, but not explained, in your reports.”

Bright's breath caught. The Vatican had better intelligence than he'd assumed.

“The hunter is—”

“The hunter is classified as 'Existential Threat Alpha' in our oldest records. We have been waiting for its arrival since the thirteenth century. The Blood-Moon Event was not a summoning. It was a failed summoning. Something went wrong. The hunter was called but not contained.” Another pause. “Now it is tracking the pieces. And the pieces are gathering in your multi-Fragment host.”

Bright closed his eyes. The Vatican's knowledge was more comprehensive than the Foundation's. Seven hundred years of records. Seven hundred years of watching.

“What do you want, Cardinal?”

“I want to prevent Cardinal Aldric from creating more hosts like your Ace. I want to prevent the hunter from reaching her. I want to end a practice that has caused suffering for seven centuries.” A breath. “But my faction is not the majority. The Vatican will vote on its position within forty-eight hours. Cardinal Aldric has the votes to mandate containment. Your triad will be ordered to stand down. The multi-Fragment host will be taken into Vatican custody.”

“And if we refuse?”

“Then you will be in violation of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. The Church's containment teams are authorized to use force. And they are very, very old. Very practiced. They have been dealing with entities like your Ace for longer than the Foundation has existed.”

The call ended.

Thread B: The Triad

The safehouse was quiet. Mai traced patterns on her tablet, reading and re-reading the data from the Fragment Catalogue. Shammy stood by the window, feeling the air currents move through Rome's ancient streets. Ace sat in the center of the room, mechanical bird in palm, ticking.

The call with Dr. Bright had ended. The situation was clear.

“The Vatican wants to contain me.” Ace's shadow-pressure expanded, making the room feel smaller. “Study me. Use me.”

“Some of them.” Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. “Not all. Bright said they're divided.”

“Divided means some want to help.” Shammy's warmth was careful, measured. “And some want to control.”

"Which means we need to know who's in charge." Mai's voice was analytical. But her hand trembled slightly. A detail only Shammy's atmospheric sense would catch. "Who in the Vatican can be trusted. Who wants the Fragment knowledge. Who wants to destroy it."

"The thief is destroying the knowledge." Ace's mechanical bird was ticking. Wound. Unwound. "The Vatican created it. We're caught in between."

"Then we navigate." Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out, feeling the pressure in the room, the tension radiating from her triad-mates. "We figure out who wants what. We find allies. We avoid enemies."

"And the hunter?" Mai's hand pressed against her tablet. "It's still coming. The more Fragments I hold, the brighter the signal." Ace's voice was flat. "Every moment we wait, it gets closer."

"Then we find the Fragment Catalogue. We learn what we can. We prepare."

Mai looked up from her tablet. "The Catalogue may not have what we need. The thief has been destroying the manuscripts that contain release methods. If the Catalogue doesn't have the information—"

"Then we learn from Elena." Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. "The stabilization methods. The integration techniques. What we can't find in the manuscripts, we find from the thief."

"The thief." Ace's voice was flat. "Elena. She's been destroying the knowledge. Preventing more hosts from being created."

"And teaching us how to survive." Shammy's warmth returned. "She's on our side. She's trying to help."

"She's trying to stop the hunter." Mai's analytical voice carried a tremor. "She needs us to survive. To understand how we're holding two Fragments. To create a defense."

"Then we help each other." Ace's mechanical bird was ticking. "We learn from her. She learns from us. We face the hunter together."

Shammy moved from the window to Ace's side. The air in the room shifted. Warmer. Calmer. Her atmospheric sense wasn't just physical. It was emotional. She could feel the weight that Ace was carrying. The pressure of two entities, one burning, one ancient, both stirring.

"Little shadow." Her voice was soft. "You're holding too much."

"I'm holding enough."

"For now." Mai's voice cut through, analytical but not cold. "The stabilization from Elena's methods is working. But the second Fragment, the burning one, is less integrated. It's not settled. Violet is helping contain it. But Violet is also part of a larger whole that wants to reassemble."

"The hunter." Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. "It's drawn to the pieces."

"It's drawn to the signal that the pieces emit when they gather." Mai's fingers resumed their pattern-tracing. "The more concentrated the Fragments, the brighter the signal. The closer the hunter gets. It's triangulation."

"Then the hunter is coming regardless of what we do."

"No. We can mask the signal. Dampen it. Buy time." Mai's voice was precise. "But that requires understanding the Fragment resonance at a level we don't currently possess."

"The thief has that understanding."

"Maybe. But she's also destroying the records that contain that understanding. She's taking knowledge with her when she destroys." Mai's voice carried frustration. "We need to talk to her. Learn from her. Before she destroys the last of it."

Thread A: The Foundation

Dr. Bright made a second call. This one to Foundation headquarters.

"Update on the Vatican situation." His voice was professional. Controlled. "The Church is divided. The majority faction favors containment and study of the multi-Fragment host. They're preparing to vote on mandatory custody within forty-eight hours."

"Your recommendation?"

"Ace remains operational. The triad is effective. The thief is providing intelligence on Fragment stabilization that we can't obtain elsewhere." Bright's voice was careful. "Loss of the triad would compromise the mission."

"That's not a recommendation, Doctor. That's an operational assessment."

Bright paused. The Foundation's procedural manuals were clear. Multi-Fragment hosts were to be contained. Studied. The potential for understanding Fragment integration was too valuable to ignore. But the manuals assumed hosts were unstable, dangerous, approaching cascade.

Ace wasn't cascading. She was functioning. Holding.

"My recommendation is to maintain the triad's operational status. The host is stable. The team is effective. The alternative, handing her to the Vatican, risks seven centuries of institutional knowledge we don't have access to. They've been doing this longer than we have. They know things we don't."

"You're advocating for continued field operation of a multi-Fragment anomaly."

"I'm advocating for learning from her. The thief has release methods. The Vatican has containment history. Ace has integration stability. We need all three."

The line was silent.

"We're sending a team. Not hostile. Not containment. Observational. They'll assess the host's stability. They'll offer resources. Protection."

"Protection from what?"

"From the Vatican. From the hunter. From the Fragments destabilizing." The voice on the other end was professional. Institutional. "They're offering help. The price is study. Observation. Access."

"I'm not being studied." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded from the speaker. Bright hadn't realized

she was listening.

“Dr. Bright, the line is—”

“I'm not being contained. I'm not being used like the hosts in the monastery.” Ace's voice was flat. But the words carried weight. “I'm Foundation personnel. I'm operational. I'm holding.”

“Her status is stable,” Bright confirmed, voice heavy.

“For now. Multi-Fragment hosts don't remain stable. The record is clear. The cascade is inevitable.”

“The record is based on hosts who didn't have integration support. The triad is providing that support. The thief is providing stabilization methods. The equation has changed.”

“Then let us document the change. Let us understand how she's surviving. The knowledge could save future hosts. Could prevent future Blood-Moon events.”

“You want to study her.”

“We want to understand her. There's a difference.”

“I'm not being studied.” Ace's voice was harder now. Shadow-pressure made the room feel compressed. “I'm not being contained. I'm not being used.”

“Ace.” Bright's voice was careful. “They're offering resources. Protection. The Vatican is mobilizing. The hunter is coming. You're carrying two Fragments. You need support.”

“I have support.” Her mechanical bird was ticking. Wound. Unwound. “The triad. Mai. Shammy. That's my support. Not Foundation observers. Not Vatican containment teams.”

The Foundation line held. Bright could feel the institutional calculation happening on the other end. The Foundation wanted knowledge. They always wanted knowledge. But they also wanted operational assets. The triad was effective. Losing them would cost more than gaining a contained subject.

“We'll send a team. Liaison. Not containment. They'll observe. They'll offer support. The triad maintains operational autonomy.” A pause. “For now.”

“For now,” Bright confirmed.

The call ended.

Bright turned to the secure channel that connected to the triad's safehouse. His voice was heavy when he spoke.

“The Foundation is sending a team. Not for the thief. For you.”

“For me.” Mai's voice came through, analytical.

“She's classified as a multi-Fragment anomaly.” Bright's voice was professional. “Unprecedented. Two Fragments in one host. The Foundation wants to study. To understand.”

“They want to contain her.” Shammy's warmth sharpened.

“They want to bring her in. For study. For observation.”

“And if she refuses?”

“They're not hostile.” Bright's voice was careful. “They're positioning. They want to contain. To study. They're offering protection. Resources.”

“Protection from what?”

“From the hunter. From the Vatican. From the Fragments destabilizing.” Bright's voice was heavy. “They're offering help. But the price is containment. Study. Observation.”

“I'm not being studied.” Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. “I'm not being contained.”

“I understand.” Bright's voice was careful. “I'm not arguing for them. I'm telling you what's coming. The Foundation is sending a team. The Vatican is mobilizing. Everyone wants something.”

“And what do you want?”

“I want you to survive.” Bright's voice was heavy. “I found you after the Blood-Moon. I've watched you grow. I care about what happens to you. But I'm also Foundation. I have to report. I have to follow protocols. I'm telling you what's coming so you can prepare.”

“I know.” Ace's mechanical bird was ticking. “You've always been clear about where you stand. Protocol. But also protection. You told me what was coming. You gave me time to prepare.”

“I'm giving you time now. The Foundation team will accept your terms initially. They want cooperation, not conflict. But they'll be watching. Recording. They'll want to understand how you're holding two Fragments. Eventually, they'll want more.”

“We'll be ready.”

“Be ready.” Bright's voice was heavy. “The hunter is coming. The Vatican is divided. The Foundation is positioning. You need allies. You need to be careful. You need to survive.”

Thread B: The Triad

The triad stood in the safehouse. The calls were over. The situation was clear.

“The Foundation team is coming.” Shammy's warmth was thin. “They're not hostile. They're offering protection. But the price is containment. Study.”

“I'm not being contained.” Ace's mechanical bird was ticking. “I'm not being studied. I'm not being used.”

“Then we need to decide.” Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out, feeling the emotional pressure in the room. “Do we let them position? Do we negotiate? Do we run?”

“We don't run.” Mai's voice was analytical. “Running makes us a target. Running signals guilt. We negotiate. We find allies. We position ourselves.”

“Position ourselves as what?”

"As cooperating." Mai's hand trembled. She pressed it against the table, stabilizing. "We accept Foundation protection. But on our terms. No containment. No study without consent. We maintain autonomy."

"And if they refuse?"

"Then we find another way." Shammy's warmth returned. "We navigate. We figure out who in the Vatican can be trusted. We work with Elena. We prepare for the hunter."

"We face this together." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "Three vectors. One lock. The triad."

The Foundation team arrived in the morning.

Not hostile. Professional. A containment specialist. A researcher. A liaison.

They wanted to study. To understand. To observe. They offered protection. Resources. Access.

The triad negotiated. No containment. No study without consent. Autonomy maintained. The Foundation team accepted.

For now.

Dr. Bright pulled Mai aside after the initial briefing.

"This is a reprieve." His voice was heavy. "Not a pardon. The Foundation will come for Ace eventually. They want to understand. Multi-Fragment hosts are unprecedented. The equation is too valuable to ignore."

"I know." Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. "We need to learn what we can. Find the release method. Figure out the survival probability."

"The thief is destroying the manuscripts." Bright's voice was careful. "The Vatican created the knowledge. The Foundation wants to study it. Everyone has an agenda."

"What's your agenda?"

"I told you." Bright's voice was heavy. "I want you to survive. I found Ace after the Blood-Moon. I've watched her grow. I care about what happens."

"Then help us."

"I'm helping by telling you what's coming." Bright's voice was professional. "The Foundation team will accept your terms. For now. But they'll be watching. Recording. They'll want to understand how Ace is holding two Fragments. Eventually, they'll want more."

"We'll be ready."

The triad stood in the safehouse. The Foundation team was positioned. The Vatican was mobilizing. The hunter was coming.

“What do we do?” Shammy's warmth was thin.

“We survive.” Ace's shadow-pressure settled. “We learn. We prepare. We face what comes.”

“Together.” Mai's voice was analytical. But warmer. “Three vectors. One lock.”

“Together.” Shammy's warmth returned. “The triad. Facing everything together.”

The mechanical bird in Ace's palm ticked. Wound. Unwound. The rhythm of tension and release.

The only thing she could control.

END OF CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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