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Chapter 18: Containment Protocol

Mai's rune-traced palm pressed against her disruptor.

Drawing on reserves she shouldn't touch. The Foundation team was positioned. The Vatican was mobilizing. The hunter was coming.

And she was calculating. Always calculating.

The Foundation containment team arrived at 0347.

Four operatives. Professional. Containment matrices, stabilization harnesses, field-disruption units. Standard loadout for Class-3 anomalies. Standard for entities you couldn't reason with.

Ace wasn't an entity. But she was carrying two Fragments now. In the Foundation's calculus, that made her unprecedented.

Dr. Vasquez led the team. Containment specialist. Fifteen years. Her file said seventy-three anomaly recoveries without a single containment breach.

Mai had read that file three times in the last hour. Looking for weaknesses. Pressure points. Anything she could use.

The file showed a woman who followed protocol. Who believed in the work. Who had never once dealt with a Fragment host as anything other than a subject.

That was the problem.

That was always the problem.

Dr. Vasquez stood in the safehouse doorway. Not entering. Not retreating. The posture of someone who'd been trained to respect boundaries and trained harder to ignore them.

"Multi-Fragment hosts are unprecedented." Measured. Professional. "The Foundation needs to understand the stability parameters. How the containment architecture is holding. What variables we should track."

Mai's hand stayed on her disruptor. "The stability parameters are holding because she's holding them. She's not a passive system. She's a person."

"I understand that." Vasquez's tone shifted. Still professional, but something underneath now. "My concern isn't theoretical. Multi-Fragment hosts don't survive. The data is clear. Longest-recorded survival time for a dual-fragment host is nine days."

A beat.

“Ms. Zhao is on day eleven.”

The temperature in the room dropped. Shammy's atmospheric sense prickled. Vasquez wasn't lying. She was scared. Not of Ace. For her. The distinction mattered.

“Then the data is incomplete.” Ace's voice was flat. Her shadow-pressure pressed against the walls, making the space feel smaller. “I'm surviving because Violet and the burning Fragment are cooperating. Not fighting.”

“And if they stop cooperating?”

“Then I destabilize.” Ace's mechanical bird was ticking in her palm. She'd been winding it without realizing. “Then I collapse. Then you contain a corpse.”

Corpse. She'd said it like she was calculating probability, not contemplating death. Like it was a variable in someone else's equation.

Mai's fingers tightened on her disruptor. The equation wasn't someone else's. It was hers. She was supposed to be solving it.

The Foundation team positioned around the perimeter. Not to attack. To observe. Their instruments tracked Ace's resonance, the Fragment signatures, the containment architecture that held two entities in one human body.

Mai watched their positions. Calculated response times. Mapped the geometry of a confrontation she hoped wouldn't happen.

Vasquez was the team leader. She reported to the Board. She tracked the data. She wanted to understand.

“The hunter is coming.” Vasquez's voice was careful now. “The Foundation can offer protection. Resources. Containment protocols developed over decades.”

“Containment protocols.” Shammy's warmth thinned. The air in the room shifted, stilling, listening. “For what?”

“For the Fragment situation.” Vasquez gestured at the instruments her team had set up. “For the multi-Fragment anomaly. For the hunter tracking the resonance signature. We have facilities. Secure locations. Teams that can—”

“I'm not being contained.” Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. The lights flickered. “I'm not being studied without consent. I'm not being used.”

“You're an anomaly.” Vasquez's voice was professional, but her pulse was elevated. Mai could see the tension in her neck, the careful control of her breathing. “Unprecedented. Two Fragments in one host. The Foundation needs to understand. The equation is valuable.”

“The equation is a person.” Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. Precise. Cold. “The equation is my partner. She's not a subject. She's not a data point. And she's not going into a containment facility so your

Board can run experiments on her resonance architecture.”

“I understand your position.” Vasquez took a breath. Her fear was visible now, at least to Shabby, whose atmospheric sense read the room like text. “But you're asking me to believe that an unprecedented multi-Fragment host can maintain stability without Foundation oversight. You're asking me to trust something I have no data for.”

“Then gather data.” Ace's shadow-pressure settled. “From a distance. Without containment. Without study without consent.”

“That's unusual.” Hesitation. Her professional mask cracked, revealing something underneath. Genuine concern, buried under protocol. “The Foundation doesn't operate on trust. We operate on containment architecture, stabilization protocols, risk mitigation. I've seen what happens when Fragment hosts destabilize. The radius of effect. The casualties.” A pause. “I was in Prague in 2019. Watched a single-Fragment host collapse during a containment attempt. Seventeen people died.”

The room went silent.

Vasquez continued, softer now. “I'm not trying to hurt her. I'm trying to prevent another Prague. Fifteen years doing this work, and I've never once had to tell a family that their loved one died because we didn't understand what we were containing. I'm asking you to help me understand.”

Shabby's warmth shifted. Not disappearing, but changing texture. The air around Vasquez settled. “You're scared.”

“I'm terrified.” The professional composure cracked fully. “I've never dealt with a Fragment host who could hold a conversation. I've never had a subject tell me their stability parameters. I've never had someone ask me to trust them. I don't know what to do with that.”

“Then learn.” Ace's mechanical bird ticked in her palm. “I'm not your subject. I'm not your variable. But I'll tell you what I know. Because you're right. When I destabilize, people die. I've already lived through that once.”

Vasquez's fear shifted. Not disappearing. Transforming into something more useful. Respect, maybe. Or recognition.

“Tell me.”

The conversation that followed was technical. Mai appreciated that. Technical was something she could work with.

Ace explained the Fragment architecture. How Violet and the burning Fragment coexisted. How her shadow-pressure created space between them. How the containment was holding through negotiation, not dominance.

Vasquez asked questions. Precise ones. The questions of someone who understood containment theory, even if she'd never applied it to a human subject.

“And the stabilization methods?” Vasquez's pen moved across her tablet. “You're holding through... negotiation?”

“With Violet.” Flat. “The burning Fragment is different. Less coherent. I'm containing it through force, not agreement. That's not sustainable.”

“Mai's pattern-tracing.” Vasquez glanced at Mai. “We've seen the readouts. Her stabilization field is interfacing with your containment architecture. That's why you're stable. Not just the Fragment negotiation. The external support.”

Mai's fingers resumed their tracing. The pattern was incomplete. “Yes.”

“Then removing her from your proximity would destabilize the architecture.” Vasquez wasn't asking. She was confirming. “If the Foundation took you into custody—”

“You'd be taking my anchor.” Ace's shadow-pressure pressed harder. “You'd be taking the only thing keeping the burning Fragment from eating through my containment. You'd be creating the collapse you're trying to prevent.”

Vasquez went silent.

The mathematics were clear. The Foundation's standard protocol, remove the subject to a controlled environment, would kill Ace. Would create exactly the kind of collapse event the Foundation existed to prevent.

“The Foundation typically requires direct observation.” Vasquez's voice was careful. “I can delay. But I can't prevent. The Board will want to bring her in eventually.”

“The Foundation typically deals with anomalies that aren't people.” Shammy's warmth sharpened. The air around Vasquez pressed, just slightly. Not hostile. Present. “Ace is a person. Not a subject. Not a data point. You keep saying 'her.' That means you know.”

“I know.” Quiet. “But knowing doesn't change protocol. I can delay the containment order for seventy-two hours. Position my team for observation rather than extraction. Provide resources. Stabilization equipment. Foundation research on Fragment hosts. Anything that might help her maintain.”

“And after seventy-two hours?”

“After seventy-two hours, I have to report. The Board will send an extraction team. Not containment specialists. A tactical unit trained for high-risk anomaly recovery.” The professional mask returned. “I'm sorry. That's the limit of what I can do.”

Dr. Bright pulled Mai aside. Again.

His face was heavy with something Mai couldn't quite read. Not fear. Not resignation. Something older. The weight of institutional knowledge.

“This is a reprieve.” Low. “Vasquez will accept observation for now. She'll provide resources. But she's scared, and scared people do unpredictable things when their fear compounds.”

“I know.” Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. Her fingers pressed against her disruptor's grip. “I'm watching her. Calculating her threat level.”

“Her threat level is low. But the Foundation's interest is high.” Bright adjusted his glasses. “Multi-

Fragment hosts are unprecedented. The equation is valuable. The Board sees data points. They don't see people. Variables. Probabilities. Containment architecture."

"The equation is a person."

"I know." His voice carried weight. History. "I've known since Prague. Since I pulled a survivor out of a village that no longer existed. Since I watched her learn to hold a Fragment that should have consumed her. But to the Foundation, she's an anomaly. A data point. A resource to be studied."

"Then we need to decide." Mai's hand trembled. Slightly. Imperceptibly to anyone who wasn't watching. "Do we let them position? Do we negotiate? Do we run?"

"You don't run." Bright's voice was professional. Clinical. But underneath, Mai heard something else. Care. "Running makes you a target. Confirms the Board's assumption. That you're unstable. That containment is necessary. That extraction is the only option. You negotiate. You maintain autonomy. You prepare for what's coming."

"And the hunter?"

"The hunter is coming. The Foundation knows. They're positioning to contain. To protect. But they're also positioning to study." Bright's eyes met hers. "Vasquez will give you seventy-two hours. Use them. Figure out what you need to figure out. And when the tactical unit arrives—"

"When the tactical unit arrives?"

"Be somewhere else. Be stable. Be demonstrably not a threat. Give the Board no excuse to escalate." His voice dropped. "I've seen what happens when Foundation tactical units extract anomaly hosts. It's not clean. It's not careful. It's not something Ace survives."

The containment team positioned around the safehouse. The Vatican mobilized at the edges of the city. The hunter approached from somewhere Mai couldn't calculate.

The triad stood in the safehouse. Three vectors. One lock.

Shammy's atmospheric sense reached outward, touching the air currents, reading the pressure systems. "Vasquez's team is scared. Not hostile. Scared. They've never seen a host who can hold a conversation. Never seen someone negotiate with their own Fragment."

"Does that help?" Ace's shadow-pressure was stable. Her mechanical bird was still in her palm.

"It might." Shammy's warmth carried calculation. Unusual for her, but necessary. "Scared people can be reasoned with. Hostile people can't. She's positioning, but she's positioning for observation, not extraction. That's the space we have."

"The Foundation wants to study." Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. Her voice was precise, but Shammy could hear the tremor underneath. "The Vatican wants to contain. Everyone wants something."

"Then we navigate." Shammy's atmospheric sense spread further. "We figure out who wants what. Find allies. Avoid enemies."

"And Elena?"

Elena. The thief. The former host. The one who'd been destroying manuscripts and teaching stabilization methods.

"She's destroying the creation rituals." Mai's hand trembled again. This time, she noticed. "Preventing more hosts from being created. But she's also teaching us. Sharing stabilization methods that took her four hundred years to learn."

"Then she's an ally." Ace's mechanical bird was ticking. "For now. Until we find out what she really wants."

"She wants to survive." Shammy's warmth returned. The air in the safehouse shifted, becoming less hostile. "She wants to stop the hunter. Prevent more hosts from being created. She's been running for four hundred years. That's a lot of time to want something."

"Then we help each other." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. Not hostile. Present. "We learn from her. She learns from us. We face the hunter together."

Elena arrived at the safehouse.

Not in person. Her presence filled the atmospheric void. A shadow-pressure resonance almost identical to Ace's. The signature of someone who had held a Fragment for centuries and learned to extend it beyond their own body.

Shammy felt it first. A pressure system that wasn't there a moment ago. Air currents shifting to accommodate something that didn't occupy physical space but still had weight.

"The Foundation is positioning." Elena's presence shifted. "I've watched them do this before. They're not hostile yet. But they will be. They always are."

"We know." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. Matching Elena's. Recognizing something familiar. "We negotiated. No containment without consent. No study without permission."

"That won't last." The weight of four hundred years in her voice. "The Foundation will come eventually. They always do. They want to understand. The equation is valuable."

"Then we prepare." Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. Her analytical mind was working, calculating, solving. "We learn what we can. Figure out the release. Survive."

"The hunter is coming." Elena's presence pressed into the air. "It's tracking your resonance. Two Fragments in one host. The signal is bright. Brighter than anything it's hunted in centuries."

"Then we face it together." Shammy's warmth settled. Her atmospheric sense wrapped around the triad, around Elena's presence. "Three vectors. One lock. The triad."

"I can help." Elena's presence shifted. Something like hope. Something like desperation. "I've been dealing with the Foundation for four hundred years. I know how to navigate. How to avoid containment. How to survive. I've been running from the hunter since before your great-great-grandparents were born."

"Then help."

"I'm sharing the stabilization methods." Heavy. "Teaching you how to hold. How to survive. That's how I help. That's all I can do."

"And the hunter?"

"I don't know." Elena's presence pressed into the air. "I've been running for four hundred years. The hunter finds hosts eventually. It's patient. Persistent. I don't know how to stop it."

"Then we figure it out together."

Elena offered more than stabilization.

"I have information." Her presence settled into something more solid. Not physical, but present. "The Fragment Catalogue. The locations of the remaining manuscripts. The knowledge the Vatican created. I've been destroying it. But I've also been recording it."

"Recording it?" Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. Her analytical mind was racing now. "I thought you were destroying the knowledge."

"I'm destroying the creation rituals. The knowledge of how to make hosts. But I'm recording the other data. The release methods. The survival rates. The Fragment history." Her voice carried weight. History. Pain. "I've watched seventeen hosts die trying to release their Fragments. Recorded everything. Every variable. Every failure. Every pattern."

Mai's fingers resumed their tracing. Not nervous now. Working. "You have the data we need."

"I have some of it." Elena's presence pressed into the air. "Not all. The Vatican has copies. The Foundation has archives. But I have enough to teach you. To help you understand what you're holding."

"Then share it."

"I will." Elena's presence shifted. "But I need something in return. Information. How you're holding two Fragments. How Violet and the burning Fragment are cooperating. The data I need to help other hosts survive."

"Agreed." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "We share data. We learn from each other. We face what's coming."

"Together."

The triad and Elena. Standing in the safehouse. Two sides. One problem.

The hunter was coming. The Foundation was positioning. The Vatican was mobilizing.

But they had data. They had stabilization methods. They had each other.

"What comes next?" Shammy's warmth was thin. The atmospheric pressure outside was shifting. Something was moving in the city. Something with weight.

"We prepare." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "We learn. We survive. We face the hunter."

"The Foundation will come eventually." Elena's presence pressed into the air. "They want to understand. They want to study. They'll push for more. Seventy-two hours is what you have. Use them."

"Then we push back." Mai's hand trembled. She noticed it this time. She didn't hide it. "We maintain autonomy. We negotiate. We survive."

"The hunter will find you eventually." Elena's voice was heavy. "The signal is too bright. The resonance is too strong. Two Fragments in one host. It's never been done. Never been sustained. You're a beacon."

"Then we face it." Shammy's warmth returned. "Three vectors. One lock. The triad."

"Together." Elena's presence shifted. "All of us. All the hosts. Facing what's coming."

Dr. Vasquez returned before dawn.

Her team had set up observation equipment around the safehouse. Not intrusive. External. Resonance monitors. Atmospheric sensors. The kind of equipment that could track from a distance without requiring physical proximity.

"I've transmitted my report." Professional, but different now. Less clinical. More human. "I've recommended continued observation. No extraction. No containment. I've emphasized that Ms. Zhao's stability depends on external support. Disrupting that support would create the collapse event we're trying to prevent."

"Thank you." Mai's voice was precise. But Shammy heard something underneath. Gratitude. Rare for Mai.

"I haven't done it for you." Vasquez's mask cracked slightly. "I've seen what happens when Fragment hosts collapse. Seventeen people in Prague. Twenty-three in a village in Romania I can't even name publicly. I've spent fifteen years trying to prevent that. I'm not going to create it by following protocol blindly."

"Then why follow it at all?"

Vasquez was silent for a long moment. "Because sometimes the protocol works. Because sometimes containment saves lives. Because I've seen what happens when anomalous forces are left unchecked, and it's worse than containment. Worse than study. Worse than treating people like data points."

Her voice broke, just slightly.

"But you're right. She's not a data point. She's a person. And I've spent fifteen years trying to figure out how to do this work without losing sight of that." Vasquez's composure returned. "I've mostly failed. But I'm still trying."

Shammy felt the shift in the air. Vasquez wasn't hostile. She wasn't indifferent. She was a person trying to do impossible work with imperfect tools.

"I'll give you seventy-two hours." Firm. "That's what I can do. After that—"

"After that, we'll be somewhere else." Mai's voice was precise. Calculated. "Somewhere stable. Somewhere that gives the Board no excuse to escalate."

"I hope so." Vasquez's fear had transformed into something more useful. Resolve, maybe. "Because when the tactical unit arrives, they won't negotiate. They'll extract. And extraction for multi-Fragment hosts has a zero percent survival rate."

The triad stood in the safehouse. Three vectors. One lock.

Elena's presence filled the atmospheric void. Teaching. Sharing. Four hundred years of survival knowledge pressed into hours of instruction.

The Foundation team was positioned outside. Observing. Not extracting. Not yet.

The Vatican was mobilizing at the edges of the city. The hunter was approaching from somewhere Mai couldn't calculate.

But they had data. They had stabilization methods. They had seventy-two hours.

And they had each other.

"The release method isn't guaranteed." Elena's presence settled into something almost gentle. "You need to understand that. The hosts who survive release, they're the exception. Most Fragment hosts die in the process. The entity goes somewhere. The container..."

A pause.

"...breaks."

"I understand." Ace's shadow-pressure was stable. Her mechanical bird was still in her palm. "But I'm holding two Fragments now. One more, and I won't be able to contain either. The burning Fragment needs to be released. Violet—"

"Violet is different." Elena's voice carried recognition. "She's coherent. She's been bound longer. She's... attached to you."

"She chose me." Ace's voice was flat. But underneath, Shammy heard something. Not warmth. Not exactly. Acknowledgment. "She wants to stay. The burning Fragment doesn't. I can release one. I need to keep the other."

"Then that's where we start." Elena's presence shifted. Teaching mode. "The release method isn't about force. It's about negotiation. The Fragment has to want to go. If you try to force it, if you try to push it out, it takes everything with it."

"Negotiation." Mai's analytical mind was working. "You negotiate with your Fragment. You find out what it wants."

"You find out what it's willing to accept." Elena's voice was heavy. "Fragments don't want things the way humans want things. They're partial. Scattered. Pieces of something that was broken. They want

to be whole. But they don't know how."

"Violet wants to be whole." Ace's mechanical bird started ticking. "She showed me. In the monastery. She wants to reassemble. To become what she was before."

"Then the burning Fragment might want that too." Elena's presence pressed into the air. "Or it might want something else. You won't know until you ask."

"How do I ask?"

"You already have." Something like warmth in her voice. "You've been negotiating with Violet since the Blood-Moon Event. You've been containing. You've been surviving. That's negotiation. That's the method."

The triad stood in the safehouse as dawn approached.

Three vectors. One lock.

Seventy-two hours before the Foundation tactical unit arrived.

A hunter approaching from somewhere beyond calculation.

And a choice that none of them wanted to make.

"What do we do?" Shammy's warmth was thin. The air outside was heavy with approaching pressure.

"We survive." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. Her mechanical bird was still in her palm. "We learn. We prepare. We face what comes."

"The Foundation wants to study." Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. Her hand wasn't trembling anymore. She'd found the equation. Now she had to solve it. "The Vatican wants to contain. Everyone wants something."

"Then we navigate." Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out. Reading the air. Reading the pressure. Reading the approaching weight of things that couldn't be calculated. "We figure out who wants what. Find allies. Avoid enemies."

"And Elena?" Ace's voice was flat. But Shammy heard something underneath. Trust. Growing trust.

"She's teaching us. Sharing four hundred years of survival." Mai's analytical mind was working. "She needs our data. We need her methods. The exchange is fair."

"Then we help each other." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "We learn from her. She learns from us. We face what's coming."

"Together."

The word hung in the air. Not just Shammy's warmth. Not just Mai's precision. Not just Ace's pressure.

All three. Aligned.

END OF CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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