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## Chapter 19: The Hunter

Shammy's stormfront expanded. Then contracted.

No longer responding to her control. The air was listening to something else. Something that didn't belong.

She reached for the atmospheric pressure she'd been shaping for hours, the protective perimeter around the estate, the gentle lift that kept the triad anchored. Gone. The air currents she knew by name, the pressure systems she'd been tracking since they arrived, the subtle temperature gradients she used like fingers, everything was retreating. Pulling away from her like water draining from a basin.

"The air's wrong." Shammy's voice came out sharp. Wrong. "The currents are, I can't, something's taking them."

Mai looked up from her tablet, fingers still tracing patterns on the screen. "Define 'taking.' The atmospheric variables should be within normal—"

"Not variables." Shammy pressed her palm against the wall, feeling for something that should be there. "The air itself. It's not listening. It's like something's erasing the space between us and the atmosphere."

The hunter had arrived.

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It didn't attack. It erased.

The estate walls flickered first. Shammy saw it through the window. The garden wall that had stood for three centuries becoming less solid. Less present. The stones were there, and then they were less than there. Not destroyed. Not damaged. Reduced. As if someone had turned down the volume on reality itself.

"What is that?" Shammy's warmth was gone. Her voice was sharp. Afraid.

"The hunter." Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. Her calculation was failing. The mathematics weren't working. "It erases coherence. Things become less real around it. The space between atoms. The connections that hold matter together."

"Around me." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. The only thing holding. The void was stable. The Fragment resonance was strong enough to resist. "It's tracking me. The two Fragments. The signal is bright."

The walls flickered again. This time, Shammy felt it in her stormfront, her atmospheric control collapsing further, the air she'd shaped dissolving into something that wasn't air anymore. Not vacuum. Not nothing. Just... less. The air was forgetting how to be atmosphere.

“Everything's destabilizing.” Mai's fingers moved faster across her tablet, but her calculations weren't producing results. The patterns she traced kept dissolving before she could read them. “The local reality coherence is dropping. If this continues—”

“It won't continue.” Ace stepped forward. Shadow-pressure pushed outward from her like weight pressing through water. “I can hold. The void is stable.”

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The hunter pressed through the estate's eastern wall.

Not breaking it. Passing through it. The stones became briefly translucent, then solid again, but wrong somehow, like a photograph printed on fabric that someone had wrinkled and then smoothed. A vase on a nearby table flickered, present, then absent, then present again, but the flowers it had held were gone. Not scattered. Not dropped. Simply no longer there.

Shammy felt the garden outside losing coherence. The trees were becoming suggestions. The pathways were becoming possibilities. Reality itself was thinning, as if someone had taken an eraser to the world and was rubbing in slow, patient circles.

Mai tasted copper and static. Her unprompted memory. Something catastrophic was happening. Her body knew before her calculations did.

“The mathematics are—” She stopped. Tried again. “Two plus two is—” Her voice broke. “I can't. The variables keep shifting. The constants aren't constant.”

“Then stop calculating.” Ace's shadow-pressure expanded further, filling the room. The void was stable. The Fragment resonance resisted the erasure. “Feel instead. Trust the triad. Not the math.”

Mai's jaw tightened. Trust without calculation. Everything in her training resisted it. But her equations were collapsing, and Ace was still standing, and the shadow-pressure was the only thing keeping the room coherent.

“The triad lock.” Mai forced the words out. “Depth, Horizontal, Vertical. All three vectors aligned. We hold together.”

“My atmospheric control is failing.” Shammy pressed both palms against the wall now, trying to feel anything stable. The air was thin. Wrong. Like trying to breathe in a room where someone had removed half the oxygen. “The hunter is erasing the atmosphere. I can't, I've never, the air isn't listening.”

“Then we use what we have.” Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. Her hands were shaking. “Depth: the void. Horizontal: the equation, even broken, even failing, I can try to stabilize. Vertical: the lift. Even if the atmosphere is wrong, the vector still exists.”

“The vector exists.” Shammy's voice was thin. The warmth was gone. “But I can't reach it. The air isn't... it's like trying to lift something that's becoming weightless.”

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The hunter's presence filled the corridor.

Formless. Not human-shaped. Not entity-shaped. A void that erased reality. Things around it flickered, stopped being coherent. The walls. The floor. The air itself. Shammy could see the furniture at the edge of the room becoming less defined, like pencil marks someone was beginning to erase.

"I can't hold the atmosphere." Shammy's stormfront collapsed entirely. The lift that connected them, the vertical vector, it was there, but she couldn't reach it. "The hunter is consuming local reality. Everything I touch becomes less real."

Mai's calculation continued failing. Her nose was bleeding now. Ritual burnout, pushing her systemic limits past safe thresholds. "The mathematics aren't, there's no pattern. The equations keep rewriting themselves. I can't find a stable solution."

"Ace." Shammy grabbed Ace's arm. Her grip was tight. Too tight. "The shadow-pressure. Can you—"

"I can hold." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. The void filled the space. The only thing that didn't flicker. "The Fragment resonance is strong. Two Fragments. The void is stable. It can't erase what I'm holding."

But the pressure was enormous. Shammy could see it in Ace's stance. The subtle tremor in her shoulders. The way her weight shifted forward. Holding two Fragments against an entity that erased reality. The cost was visible.

"The hunter feeds on Fragment resonance." Mai wiped the blood from her nose with a trembling hand. "It's tracking Ace specifically. The two Fragments make her a bright signal."

"Then we reduce the signal." Shammy's warmth returned slightly. Protective. Fierce. "We shield her. The triad lock. We hold together."

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The hunter pressed closer.

Not walking. Pressing. Erasing. The walls dissolved around it. The floor became less solid. Shammy felt her boot sink slightly, not into the floor, but into the space where the floor was becoming less real.

Ace stood in front. Shadow-pressure expanded. The void resisted. The Fragment resonance held. But Shammy could see the strain. Ace's violet eyes brighter than normal, the Fragment responding to the threat, the pressure of holding two entities against something that wanted to consume them both.

"I can't hold it forever." Ace's voice was flat. Controlled. But Shammy heard the tremor underneath. "The pressure is too strong. The erasure is too fast. Two Fragments, I'm holding, but the hunter is feeding on the resonance itself."

"Then we help." Mai's calculation was failing. But she was still trying. Her fingers traced patterns on her tablet, even though the results made no sense. "The triad lock. Depth, Horizontal, Vertical. All three vectors aligned. We hold together."

"My atmospheric control is failing." Shammy's warmth was sharp. Afraid. The air wasn't responding. "The hunter is erasing the atmosphere. I can't reach the vertical vector."

"Then we find another way." Mai's hand trembled. Blood dripped onto her tablet. She didn't notice. "Depth: the void. Horizontal: the equation, even broken. Vertical: the lift, even unreachable. All three. Aligned. Together."

The hunter pressed closer. The room flickered. The walls became translucent. The floor became suggestion.

Ace's shadow-pressure strained against the erasure. The void held. Barely. Shammy could see the edges of Ace's stability fraying, the Fragment resonance guttering like a candle in wind.

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Elena appeared.

Not attacking. Helping. A presence that filled the room with weight and history and four centuries of accumulated resonance. Shadow-pressure that felt almost identical to Ace's, but deeper, older, more integrated. The kind of stability that only came from holding a Fragment for hundreds of years.

Shammy felt it like a breath of air after drowning. The sudden stability in the space where her stormfront had collapsed. The vertical vector that had been slipping away suddenly had something to grip.

"You can't hold it alone." Elena's presence pressed into the air. Her voice was heavy. Four hundred years of weight. "The hunter erases coherence. It feeds on Fragment resonance. But it can't erase what's stable. What's aligned."

"Then we align." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "The triad lock. Three vectors. One containment field."

"More than three." Elena's presence shifted. Solidified. "All of us. All the hosts. All the Fragment resonances aligned. One field. One stability."

Mai's calculation stuttered. Then resumed. "The mathematics, if we align multiple Fragment resonances, the stability coefficient increases exponentially. The hunter can't erase what's stabilized by multiple hosts."

"Then we do it." Shammy's warmth returned. Sharp. Determined. "The triad lock. Elena's resonance. All of it. Together."

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The hunter pressed. Erasing. Consuming.

But the Fragment hosts were aligning. Elena. Ace. The two Fragments inside her. All the resonance focused. All the stability directed. The room flickered, but less now. The walls became translucent, but then solid again. The floor held.

The triad lock. Depth. Horizontal. Vertical. All three vectors aligned. One containment field.

And Elena. Four hundred years of integration. Four hundred years of stability. Adding her resonance to the field.

The hunter couldn't erase what was stable. What was aligned. What was held together.

But Shammy could feel the cost. Her stormfront was collapsed entirely. She was running on fumes, on instinct, on the desperate need to maintain the vertical vector even when she couldn't reach the atmosphere. Mai's calculations were barely functioning, the nosebleed had become a steady drip, her

hands trembling so badly she could barely hold her tablet. And Ace, the pressure of two Fragments against the hunter's erasure was pulling her apart. Shammy could see it in the way Ace's shadow-pressure flickered, the way her Fragment resonance guttered.

"Hold." Elena's presence pressed into the air. Steadying. "Just hold."

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The battle was pressure. Not violence.

The hunter pressed. The containment held.

Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. The void resisted the erasure. Two Fragments. One host. The resonance was strong, but Shammy could see Ace's arms shaking, the tremor running through her shoulders, the cost of holding against something that wanted to consume what she carried.

Mai's calculation held. The equation was incomplete. But the pattern was there. The stability was there. Her nose was bleeding freely now, her vision probably blurring, but she kept tracing patterns. Kept trying. Kept holding the horizontal axis steady even as her mathematics failed.

Shammy's stormfront lifted. The atmosphere wasn't responding. But the lift was there. The vertical vector. The rising column. She couldn't control the air, but she could be the lift. She could hold the space between them. The connection.

And Elena. Four hundred years of integration. Shadow-pressure. Void resonance. Adding to the field. Making the containment stronger.

The hunter pressed. But couldn't erase. The containment held.

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"The hunter can't be destroyed." Elena's presence pressed into the air. Heavy. Tired. "It can only be held back. The containment can resist. But it can't eliminate."

"Then we hold." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. Straining. "Until it retreats."

"It will retreat." Elena's voice was heavy with centuries. "It can't erase what's stable. What's aligned. It will find easier targets. It will leave."

"And come back." Mai's voice was thin. The calculation was costing her. "The mathematics suggest it will return. The hunter is patient. Persistent. It tracks Fragment resonance."

"Yes." Elena's presence pressed. "It will come back. It always comes back. But we can hold. For now."

"For now is enough." Ace's shadow-pressure settled slightly. Still straining. Still holding. "We survive. Then we prepare. Then we face it again."

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The hunter pressed harder.

The containment flickered. Shammy felt her vertical vector straining. The lift that connected them wasn't atmospheric anymore. It was will. It was the desperate need to hold her triad together even

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when everything was falling apart. The air wasn't listening. The atmosphere wasn't responding. But the connection between them, that was hers. That was what she held. Not the air. Not the weather. The triad itself.

Mai's calculation stuttered. The equations kept dissolving. But the pattern was there, broken, incomplete, but present. She held it through sheer determination. Through trust. Through something her training had never accounted for: belief in her team when the mathematics failed.

"The stability coefficient, it's dropping. We need—"

"I know." Ace's shadow-pressure strained. The Fragment resonance guttered. "I feel it."

Elena's presence shifted. Something in the resonance changed. "I'm releasing my Fragment."

The words hung in the air. Not erased. Not consumed. Held.

"What?" Shammy's warmth was sharp. Afraid. "Elena—"

"I'm releasing my Fragment." Elena's presence was heavy. Centuries of weight. "Not to the space between. To you. Adding my resonance to yours. Strengthening the containment. Making it harder for the hunter to find us."

"You're sacrificing yourself."

"I'm becoming part of the field." Elena's presence pressed. "Four hundred years of integration. I'm adding it to the triad lock. I'm making the containment stronger. I'm making the hunter's job harder."

"And you?" Mai's voice was barely a whisper. Her calculation had stopped entirely.

"I become human." Elena's presence was heavy. Tired. Resolved. "I release. The Fragment goes somewhere. I stay. But the resonance remains. The stability remains. Part of the field."

"Why?" Ace's shadow-pressure held. But her voice was thin.

"Because I'm tired of running." Elena's presence pressed into the air. Warm. Almost gentle. "I've run for four hundred years. I've watched other hosts get erased. I've seen the hunter take Fragment after Fragment, host after host. I've survived by being fast. Being careful. Being alone."

Her presence flickered briefly. The cost of what she was about to do already showing.

"I don't want to survive alone anymore. I want to contribute something before the hunter finds us again. I want to help you survive. All of you."

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Elena released.

The resonance merged with the triad lock. Four hundred years of integration. Four hundred years of stability. Added to the containment field. Shammy felt it like a wave, not air, not atmosphere, but stability itself. The vertical vector suddenly had weight. Had presence. Had something to hold.

The hunter pressed one final time. Erasing. Consuming. Desperate. The room flickered, the walls almost giving way, the floor almost becoming nothing, the air almost forgetting how to be air.

But it couldn't erase what was stable. What was aligned. What was held together by four hundred years of Fragment resonance and three vectors aligned and a triad that refused to break.

The hunter retreated.

Not defeated. Just unable to erase what was stable. What was aligned. What was held together.

The estate flickered. Walls became solid again. The floor became real. The air became atmosphere. Shammy's stormfront slowly returned, not fully, not yet, but present. Listening.

The erasure stopped. The hunter left. Gone. But not destroyed.

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Elena stood in the room. Human now. Not a presence. A person.

She looked tired. Older than her presence had suggested. Four hundred years of holding a Fragment had preserved her, kept her in a kind of stasis, but now the years were showing. Lines around her eyes. Gray in her hair. Vulnerable. Mortal.

But alive. She was breathing. Her heart was beating. She was real in a way she hadn't been for four centuries.

"Thank you." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. The strain remained, but the immediate crisis had passed. "For the resonance. For the stability. For helping us hold."

"I'm tired of running." Elena's voice was human now. Quiet. Exhausted. "I want to contribute something before the hunter finds us again."

"You did." Shammy's warmth returned. Fierce. Grateful. "You made the containment stronger. You made the hunter's job harder."

"I did." Elena's voice was tired. "And now I need to rest. The release is exhausting. Even when you survive."

She sat down heavily on the nearest surface. The floor held. The walls stood. Reality remained.

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The triad lock held. The hunter retreated. Elena survived.

But the cost was visible.

Mai's calculation had stopped entirely. Her nose was bleeding freely, her hands trembling, her eyes unfocused. Ritual burnout. She'd pushed her systemic limits past safe thresholds for minutes, long enough that the cost would take hours to recover from. Maybe longer.

Shammy's atmospheric control was weak. The stormfront was barely there. The lift was strained. The vertical vector was holding, but Shammy's face was pale, her movements slow. The air was listening again, but Shammy was too exhausted to shape it.

Ace's shadow-pressure was stable. But the weight of two Fragments was pulling. The integration was incomplete. The containment was holding. But barely. Her violet eyes were brighter than normal, the

Fragments still active, still responding to the threat even though it had passed.

"We need to rest." Shammy's warmth was thin. Exhausted. "The triad lock costs. We're all strained."

"We need to prepare." Mai's hand trembled as she wiped blood from her face. "The hunter will come back. We need to be ready."

"We need to release." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "The two Fragments. We need to decide. We need to choose."

"Or integrate." Shammy's warmth sharpened slightly. "Become one with the Fragments. Like Elena."

"Or hold." Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. "Continue stabilizing. Continue surviving."

"We decide together." Ace's mechanical bird was ticking. She'd wound it without noticing, her hand finding the ritual action without conscious thought. "Three vectors. One lock. We face what comes together."

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The estate stood. The walls held. The air was atmosphere again.

But something had changed. The hunter had found them. The erasure had touched their reality. And they'd held, but the cost had been dear.

"The hunter is what the Blood-Moon Event was trying to summon." Mai's voice was thin. Still recovering. "The ritual wasn't reassembling Fragments. It was calling the hunter. The Fragments scattered to escape it."

"Reassembling them brings the hunter." Ace's shadow-pressure was stable. But her voice was hollow. "Violet wants reunion. Reunion summons the hunter. The entity that feeds on Fragment resonance."

"The thief was right to destroy the containment records." Shammy's warmth was grim. "The records contain the rituals to create Fragments. More Fragments would mean more signals. More signals would mean the hunter would find us faster."

"We need to find the thief." Mai's calculation resumed slowly. Painfully. "They have the release method. They know how to survive Fragment release. We need that knowledge."

"We need to survive first." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "Rest. Recover. Then we find the thief."

"And the hunter?"

"It will come back." Ace's mechanical bird ticked in her palm. "It always comes back. But we'll be ready. The triad lock held once. It will hold again."

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Elena rested against the wall. Human. Vulnerable. But at peace.

"The hunter has never been held back before." Quiet. Tired. "Four hundred years, I've run from it. Every Fragment host I've known has run from it. The hunter erases. It doesn't retreat."

"It retreated from us." Mai's hand trembled. "The triad lock. Elena's resonance. The combined stability."

"It retreated because you held together." Elena's eyes closed. "Most Fragment hosts are alone. Isolated. The hunter picks them off one by one. But the triad, you're aligned. You're stable. You're something the hunter hasn't faced before."

"Then we're the target." Ace's voice was flat. "The hunter will come back. It will bring more. It will find a way to erase what's stable."

"It will try." Elena's voice was fading. Sleep was claiming her. The exhaustion of release. "But you held once. Remember that. You held."

She slept. Human. Mortal. Alive.

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The triad stood in the estate. The hunter was gone. But not destroyed.

"What was that?" Shammy's warmth was thin. Still processing.

"The hunter." Mai's hand trembled. "The thing the Source was trying to escape. The thing that feeds on Fragment resonance. It erases coherence. It makes things less real."

"It pressed." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "But we held. The triad lock. Elena. All of us aligned. It couldn't erase what was stable."

"It will come back." Elena had said it. Mai's calculations confirmed it. The hunter was patient. Persistent. Eternal.

"Then we prepare." Ace's mechanical bird was ticking. "We stabilize. We align. We face it again when it returns."

"And if it brings more?" Shammy's warmth was grim.

"Then we hold more." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded slightly. "Together. Three vectors. One lock."

Mai's calculation finally stabilized. The pattern emerged. Not a solution, but a direction. "We need the thief. We need the release method. We need to understand what happens when Fragments scatter."

"We need to survive first." Shammy's warmth returned slightly. Exhausted. But present. "Rest. Recovery. Then we move."

"Agreed." Ace's shadow-pressure settled.

They'd held.

For now, it was enough.

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