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Chapter 1: The Breach That Wasn't

The warehouse had been a textile factory before it became a temple. Before that, something else. Shammy could smell the layers, cotton dust under incense, machine oil under blood. Prague's industrial bones pressed flat by something that had crawled up through the foundation and made the building its own.

Sandalwood and myrrh. Catholic standard. But underneath, older. Something that predated the bricks.

Prague, 2:47 AM. Spring hadn't arrived yet. The Vltava was three blocks east and Shammy could feel its moisture pulling at the atmospheric pressure, the water trying to drag the air toward itself. Inside though. Inside was different.

The ritual-site breathed something that wasn't air.

Shammy tilted her head, reading pressure the way other people read newspapers. The currents were wrong. Sterile, controlled. Nothing lived here. The more she reached, the more they withdrew. Like the air itself was being commanded by something that didn't want to be felt.

"The perimeter's holding." Mai's voice through the earpiece. Precise as a scalpel. "Seventeen-meter radius. Containment signature's stable. Whatever's in there, it's not breaking out through conventional physics."

Shammy stood at the entrance, storm-gradient hair lifting as she tested the pressure. The building wanted to push her out. Not force. Something older. Whatever they'd summoned had changed the air itself, made it hostile to anyone who breathed differently, moved differently, existed outside its parameters.

Not just sterile.

Actively resistant.

"Shammy." Ace's voice. Four syllables. Her longest sentence of the night.

"I know." Shammy probed the differential. The air currents pushed against her storm-gradient, pushed back against her presence. "Something's wrong with the air. It's not trying to contain. It's trying to escape. Whatever's in there, it wants out."

The warehouse doors had been reinforced with chains older than the building. Iron links, rusted in patterns too deliberate for neglect. Someone had wanted them to look abandoned while staying functional. Someone had tried to keep something in.

Someone had failed.

Mai's cold-focus aura stabilized the space around her as she traced rune-structures on her tablet. Fingers working patterns her mind was solving. The unconscious habit. Her hands always a step

ahead of her consciousness.

“The math doesn't match a standard summoning.” Mai looked up. “The circuit's inverted.”

“Inverted how?”

Ace's shadow-pressure pressed against the walls, making the space feel smaller. Void-weight. Depth vector. She stood at the threshold, katanas still sheathed. The perimeter guards had stepped back when she arrived. They always did. The air around her carried the particular silence of places where predators had passed.

“Summoning brings something through.” Mai's silver hair caught the dim emergency light. “This is pushing something away. The anomaly isn't here. It's already gone. The ritual was containment, not invocation.”

Shammy felt it before she saw it. Pressure shift inside. Air moving against physics. Her body remembered being a storm, phantom rain on her arms even though the air was dry.

“It's not gone.” She said it slowly, feeling the shape of the wrongness. “It's hiding.”

The doors exploded inward.

The thing that burst through wasn't what they expected.

Shammy's first thought: *It's running.*

Humanoid in the loosest sense. A form that couldn't decide what it wanted to be. Limbs flickering between solid and smoke, a face cycling through expressions like someone flipping channels. It moved fast, directly away from the warehouse. Away from whatever was inside.

Ace moved before thought. Emerald katanas cleared the sheaths with a frequency-hum below hearing, above feeling. The blades knew something was wrong before she did, vibrating in her grip.

She didn't strike.

The anomaly blew past her. Through shadow-pressure, through perimeter, through Mai's cold-focus stabilization. It didn't attack. It fled. The kind of desperate flight that ignored obstacles, ignored threats, ignored everything except the need to escape.

“Ace.” Mai started.

“I see it.” Flat. Not a question. A statement. Her hand tightened on the katana grip. The mechanical bird in her palm, she didn't remember reaching for it, ticked against her skin. Her fingers found the clockwork sparrow on instinct. Checking spring tension. A childhood ritual. Grounding.

The only thing she did that had no operational purpose.

The anomaly was running from something. Whatever it was running from was still inside.

Shammy raised her hand. The atmosphere answered. Stormfront extending, pressure differential slamming into place. She could feel the air currents now, the way they bent around the warehouse entrance. Something inside was still pulling. The air itself being called toward something hungry.

"Shammy." Mai's voice, sharp. "The signature. It's not a single anomaly."

"What do you mean?"

"Two containment signatures. The one that fled, and one that's still contained." Mai's fingers traced patterns on the air itself. Cold-focus extending, stabilizing, reading. "The ritual wasn't trying to summon. It was trying to hold something back."

Ace's mechanical bird was still in her palm. Wings ticking. She wound the spring, unwound it, wound it again.

The rhythm steadied her.

Then the burning copper smell hit her. Unprompted. Unwanted. Her village. The Blood-Moon Event. Fire and screaming and ash in her mouth.

Not here. Violet whispered in the back of her consciousness. The Fragment she carried, the entity that had lived inside her since the night her world ended. *Not yet.*

The warehouse doors stood open now. Beyond them, darkness. Something else.

Something that didn't flee.

"Standard approach?" Mai asked, already calculating.

Ace shook her head. "Not standard."

Shammy felt the atmospheric weight inside. Whatever was in there, it wasn't trying to escape like the first one. It was waiting. The air was listening. Not to her. To something else. A storm that had already decided where it would break.

"Shammy, can you read the environment?"

Mai traced patterns on the air, fingers leaving faint light-trails of stabilization. The rune-structures were second nature. She'd designed the Foundation's standard containment arrays, refined them after Tokyo. After the calculations that had been seconds too slow.

"It's." Shammy tilted her head. The air currents whispered, atmospheric pressure mapping the space inside. "Something's wrong. The air isn't responding like it should."

"Sterile?"

"No. Worse. Like it's been claimed." Shammy's hair lifted. Involuntary. Storm-gradient reacting to what she felt. "The pressure's wrong. It's listening to something that isn't us."

Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. In the industrial darkness, her silhouette became harder to define. Void-weight making corners deeper, shadows thicker, space itself more compressed. Depth vector. She didn't move through space so much as make space accommodate her absence.

"I'll take point."

Mai started to object. Calculation ran through tactical options, probabilities, vectors, the mathematics

of threat assessment.

But Ace was already moving.

The triad operated by trust. Mai's job wasn't to stop her. It was to support her. Calculate for variables she couldn't control. Account for the equation she couldn't solve.

Even when she hated it.

"Mai, the circuit." Shammy's voice was warmer, but tight. "I'll hold the perimeter. If something comes out that isn't Ace..."

"I'll handle it." Mai's fingers traced the stabilizing pattern one more time. The copper taste in her mouth. Static and something older. Her body predicting what her mind hadn't calculated yet.

They moved.

Inside, the ritual-site was still burning.

Not with fire. Something else. The air shimmered with containment residue. Rune-structures carved into concrete, painted in substances that glowed under their own power. Someone had spent weeks preparing this. Patterns layering over each other. Old magic, new technology, Foundation-standard containment principles applied to something that predated the Foundation by centuries.

Ace moved through shadow-pressure, making the space feel smaller. Her katanas hummed at frequencies below perception, above sound. Forged to cut things that shouldn't exist.

Things like what was waiting in the center of the circle.

The anomaly was bound. Chains of light, no, chains of something else, something that hurt to perceive directly, held it in place. It hadn't fled because it couldn't. A mass of contradictory presence. Flickering between forms, between existences, between the thing it had been and the thing it was becoming.

Not humanoid like the first one. A wound in reality. A place where the world had tried to heal and failed.

Violet stirred.

Don't, Ace thought. Not now. Not in the field.

The thing shifted. Not physically. Shifted in ways that weren't physical.

Then it spoke. Not with sound. With pressure. With presence.

You're like us.

Ace didn't respond. Shadow-pressure tightened around her like armor. The mechanical bird kept ticking. Wind, unwind, wind.

The vessel. The container. You hold something that shouldn't be held.

Her katanas hummed louder. Mai's voice through the earpiece: "Ace, the signature is destabilizing. Whatever you're doing—"

Not doing anything, Ace thought. It's doing it.

The anomaly was trying to reach her. Not physically. Reaching through containment, through ritual, through something older than language. The pressure increased. Ace felt Violet respond. Not surfacing. Listening.

You survived the breaking. How?

Grip tightened on the katana. The mechanical bird in her other hand, still wound, still ticking. The burning copper smell again. Unprompted. Unwanted. Her village. Her past.

Not here, Violet whispered inside her. Not yet.

They broke the world to make you, the anomaly pressed. The least you can do is tell me—

"Ace!" Mai's voice, sharp. "The containment's failing. Whatever it's doing, it's pulling power from somewhere else. You need to move."

Ace didn't move.

The anomaly was still pressing. The pressure inside her skull now. Not painful, but present. Asking. Demanding. Knowing.

They're coming for you. For what you carry. The scattered pieces are waking up. You think you're the only vessel?

The chains of light flickered. Mai was right. The containment was destabilizing.

But Ace didn't step back.

She stepped forward.

The mechanical bird ticked in her palm. Shadow-pressure expanded, filled the space around her, made the air acknowledge her presence.

What scattered pieces?

The anomaly laughed. Not with sound. With presence. A terrible thing, a laugh in pressure and void. Tasted like burning copper and static.

You don't know? They didn't tell you what you're carrying?

Who's they?

The containment shattered.

The explosion threw Ace backward. Shadow-pressure absorbed most of the impact, void-weight dispersing force across impossible dimensions. She hit the wall hard enough to feel it, not hard enough to break.

Shammy's stormfront slammed into place from outside. Containing the blast radius.

Mai's cold-focus stabilized the immediate area. Equations solving themselves in the air, patterns locking down, the math of containment made manifest.

The triad moved together. Depth, Horizontal, Vertical. Without speaking. Without thinking.

But the anomaly wasn't attacking.

The thing that had been bound was pulling itself apart. Dissolving. The containment had been the only thing holding it together. Without the ritual, without the chains, it couldn't maintain coherence. Falling into itself. Collapsing into the space between.

Find the manuscripts, it pressed into the air as it dissolved. The scattered pieces are waking up. The hunter is coming.

Gone.

Ace stood slowly. Katanas still drawn, still humming. The mechanical bird still ticking in her palm. She didn't remember winding it. Her fingers had found the rhythm on their own.

"Ace." Mai's voice, controlled. "What did it say to you?"

Shadow-pressure settled. The warehouse felt emptier now. But something remained. The smell of burning copper. The taste of ash. A question she didn't want to ask.

"It asked what I was carrying."

Mai's fingers stopped tracing patterns. "And?"

"I didn't tell it anything." Flat. She sheathed her katanas and started walking toward the exit. The mechanical bird kept ticking. Her rhythm. Her grounding.

Shammy fell into step beside her. The taller woman's presence was warm, atmospheric control pushing out the wrongness that had settled in the warehouse. "You okay, little shadow?"

Ace didn't answer. She didn't need to. Shammy could read her silence like other people read books.

The mechanical bird kept ticking. She hadn't wound it. She hadn't needed to. The spring had wound itself, responding to something she didn't understand.

Outside, the Prague night was cold and clear. The first anomaly was long gone. The second had dissolved, leaving a warning and a question. Mai was already on her tablet, calculating patterns, tracing signatures. The copper taste fading from her mouth.

"The containment signature matches a classification I've seen before." Mai's voice was precise. Analytical. "Not Foundation-standard. Older."

"How old?" Shammy asked.

"Decades. Maybe centuries." Mai's voice precise, but Shammy heard the uncertainty underneath. The calculation that didn't quite solve. "This wasn't a new ritual site. Someone's been doing this for a long time."

Ace's phone buzzed. A message from Dr. Bright. One line.

Get back to the field office. Something's happened at the Vatican.

She showed the screen to Mai and Shammy.

"The Vatican?" Shammy's hair lifted. Atmospheric response to surprise. "That's outside our jurisdiction."

"Jurisdiction just changed." Mai was already calculating routes, fingers tracing equations on the air. "Bright wouldn't call us in unless it involved the classification system. Something's happened."

Ace looked at the warehouse one more time. The ritual-site still smoldering. The chains still glowing faintly, residue, containment echo. Whatever had been bound here had been waiting for a long time. Centuries, Mai had said. Someone had been doing this for centuries.

Find the manuscripts, the anomaly had said. The scattered pieces are waking up.

She didn't know what that meant. But Violet stirred in the back of her consciousness. Something about the words had resonated. Something about *scattered pieces* had made the entity inside her pay attention.

"Ace." Mai's voice, pulling her back. "We need to move."

She nodded. Shadow-pressure contracted, making the space around her feel normal again. The mechanical bird kept ticking.

They walked out together. Depth, Horizontal, Vertical. The triad moving as one.

The field office was six blocks away. Prague had been a textile center before it became a ritual site. The industrial bones still showed through, brick and iron repurposed for containment. Mai had calculated the most efficient route in her head. Traffic patterns, police presence, probability of encounters. All accounted for.

Shammy walked beside Ace, atmospheric sense reaching out. The air in Prague was different from Rome, from Tokyo, from the other cities they'd worked in. It carried history. Layers of intention and event settled into the stone. Centuries of alchemists and artists and wars. The pressure told stories if you knew how to listen.

"You're quiet," Shammy said. Not accusatory. Observation. Warm.

Ace didn't respond. Still thinking about the anomaly. The way it had shifted, trying to reach her. The words it had pressed into the air.

They broke the world to make you.

Her village. The Blood-Moon Event. The thing that had destroyed everyone she knew and left her alive. She'd spent years not thinking about it. Violet carried memories she couldn't access. Locked away, hidden behind doors she didn't know how to open.

Shammy's hand touched her shoulder. Gentle. The taller woman's presence was warm. When

Shammy touched you, you felt the weather of her emotions, the front moving through, the pressure changing.

“Whatever it said,” Shammy murmured, “you don't have to carry it alone.”

Ace almost smiled. Almost. Her face didn't do that much anymore. But the mechanical bird kept ticking, and for a moment she let herself feel the warmth. Let herself be held up by the atmospheric support Shammy offered.

Just for a moment.

Mai walked on Ace's other side, tablet in hand. Silver hair catching the streetlight. Cold-focus aura stabilizing the space around them. She hadn't spoken since they'd left the warehouse. Which meant she was calculating. Running equations, processing data, solving problems her mind hadn't finished with.

Mai's silence was different from Ace's. Ace's was a door. Mai's was a machine still running.

“The signature from the first anomaly,” Mai said finally. “It was fleeing. Not attacking.”

“I noticed.”

“That's atypical. Anomalies usually engage when contained. This one ran.” Mai's voice precise, but Shammy heard the question underneath.

“Something worse than us.” Shammy's hair lifted. Atmospheric response to the thought. “It was running from something worse than us.”

Mai nodded, fingers tracing patterns on her tablet. “Which means either something released it intentionally, or something else is hunting anomalies.”

Ace's shadow-pressure tightened. The mechanical bird in her palm stopped ticking.

She looked down. The spring had unwound completely. The clockwork sparrow sat still in her hand.

She hadn't touched it.

“Shammy.” Flat. “The air. Is it—”

Shammy's eyes widened. Hair lifting, storm-gradient responding to atmospheric shift. The pressure around them changed.

“Something's coming.”

They made it to the field office before it arrived.

Prague field office. Converted textile building. Brick walls reinforced with containment arrays, windows replaced with frequency-dampened glass. Mai had designed the security system. It hummed with her equations, her patterns, her calculations.

Dr. Bright's voice through the secure channel. Calm. Clinical. The professional tone that never quite hid the human underneath.

"Triad. We have a situation."

"We noticed." Mai's voice precise, cold-focus extending to stabilize the communications equipment.

"Two anomalies in Prague. One fled. One dissolved. Both made references to scattered pieces."

"The Vatican situation is related. That's why I'm pulling you off Prague containment and deploying you to Rome."

Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. "Vatican."

"Manuscripts stolen from the Secret Archives. The thief's signature matches a classification we thought contained forty years ago." Bright paused. "There's something else. The thief isn't human."

Shammy's atmospheric sense flared. "What kind of signature?"

"Fragment-class. The same designation we gave to..." Bright stopped. "The same class as Violet."

Ace's mechanical bird was still in her palm. She started winding it. Consciously this time. The spring ticked against her fingers. One-two-three-four. The rhythm she'd used since childhood.

"Someone like me," she said. Not a question.

"Someone carrying something like what you're carrying." Bright's voice was careful. Professional, but weighted. "We need you in Rome. The Vatican is requesting Foundation assistance. They've lost texts that shouldn't exist."

Mai's calculations were already running. "What kind of texts?"

"The kind that contain the procedures for creating Silent Vessels." Bright paused. "The kind that made you what you are."

Quiet.

Shammy's hair settled. Mai's fingers stopped moving on her tablet. Ace kept winding the mechanical bird. One-two-three-four. Grounding through ritual.

"I'll brief you on the flight," Bright continued. "Pack light. The Vatican doesn't like outside interference. They're allowing this because they have no choice."

"When do we leave?"

"Transport is waiting. Wheels up in thirty minutes."

The line went dead.

Ace looked at the clockwork sparrow. The spring was wound tight now. Tension stored in metal and mechanism. Ready to release.

Mai was already moving. Calculating routes, equipment, contingencies. Fingers tracing patterns on the air. Shammy was checking atmospheric pressure outside, reading the weather of the coming flight.

Ace stood still.

The ritual in Prague had been about containment. Holding something back. The anomaly had fled. Something worse was coming.

The scattered pieces are waking up. The hunter is coming.

Violet stirred inside her. Silent since the warehouse. But now.

Manuscripts, Violet whispered. From somewhere deeper than Ace's conscious mind. They're looking for the manuscripts.

Who?

The ones who broke the world.

Ace didn't respond. She sheathed the mechanical bird in her pocket. Its weight pressed against her thigh. Outside, the Prague night was ending. In a few hours, Rome.

In the Vatican.

Where someone had stolen texts about Fragment hosts. About Silent Vessels. About how to make people like her.

"Ready?" Mai asked.

Ace nodded. Shadow-pressure settled. The triad walked toward the transport together. Depth, Horizontal, Vertical. Three vectors aligned against something they didn't understand yet.

But they would.

The plane was Foundation-standard. Efficient. Stripped down. Built for deployment.

Shammy sat by the window, reading atmospheric pressure at thirty thousand feet. Thinner here, cleaner. Less history, less weight. She could feel the jet streams moving around them, pressure systems that had traveled across continents.

Mai was in the back, working equations on her tablet. Occasionally tracing patterns on the armrest when calculations needed grounding. Fingers moving in rhythms her conscious mind hadn't finished processing.

Ace sat in the middle, mechanical bird in her palm. Wound it three times since takeoff. The rhythm automatic now. Muscle memory.

Shammy watched her. The little shadow had been quiet since the warehouse. Quieter than usual, which was saying something. Ace's baseline was measured in syllables, not sentences. But this was different. This was the silence of something churning underneath.

"Something's bothering you," Shammy said. Not accusatory. Observation. The warm delivery that made her the emotional bridge of the triad.

Ace's violet eyes flicked to her. "The anomaly. Before it dissolved. It asked what I was carrying."

"And?"

"It said they broke the world to make me." Ace's voice flat. Four words, then two more. The most she'd said all night. "Violet didn't disagree."

Shammy read the pressure around Ace. Shadow-weight making the space feel smaller, deeper. They'd worked together for years. Learned each other's rhythms, each other's silences. Shammy could read Ace's quiet like other people read books.

"Violet doesn't tell you everything," Shammy said.

"No." Ace's fingers kept working the mechanical bird. Wind, unwind, wind. "She doesn't."

Mai moved up from the back, cold-focus aura stabilizing the cabin's atmosphere. "The Vatican texts. If they're about Fragment creation—"

"Then someone knows what I am." Ace's voice cut through. "Someone besides the Foundation."

Mai sat across from her. Silver hair catching the cabin light. "This isn't just about containment anymore. The thief isn't human. They're carrying something. If they're looking for manuscripts about Fragment hosts—"

"They're looking for answers." Shammy's voice warm, atmospheric. "Or they're looking for more hosts."

Ace's shadow-pressure tightened. The mechanical bird stopped ticking.

"Or they're looking for me."

The plane carried them toward Rome. Below, the world was waking up. And somewhere in the Vatican, manuscripts about Fragment creation waited in the dark.

The scattered pieces were waking up.

The hunter was coming.

And the triad was flying directly toward both.

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