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Chapter 8: Reunion Pressure

The mechanical bird in Ace's palm.

Wind and unwind. The rhythm of tension and release. But the rhythm was changing. Getting faster some days. Slower others. Less predictable.

Violet's presence was closer now. Not just inside. Around. The Anchor's memories. The burning fragment's remnants. Three pieces integrated. And the wanting was stronger, a pull that never quite stopped, like a tide that never quite receded.

The gathering is accelerating. Violet's presence pressed against Ace's consciousness. The more pieces I hold, the more I want. The more I want, the closer the Hunter comes.

"You're feeling it." Ace. Flat. "The wanting. The need to gather."

I'm feeling it. The presence shifted inside. Not comfortable. Not fighting either. The burning fragment that stayed. The Anchor's memories. They're not just inside me now, they're part of me. And they want what I want. What we want. A pause. To be whole.

"Can you hold it?"

...I don't know. The admission was quiet. The triad lock is helping. Mai sees the math. Shammy feels the pressure. But the wanting is always there. The need to gather. The pieces are calling to each other. They want to come together.

Mai's hand pressed flat against her thigh. The tremor was visible. Copper and static. The taste before the equation failed.

But the equation wasn't failing. The math was clear. She could see it now, the patterns, the equations, the way reality held itself together, and the sight of it was beautiful and terrible at once.

"Ace's integration is accelerating." Mai. Precise. The way she got when the numbers were clear and the implications were not. "The more pieces she holds, the more the Scattered reforms. The more the Scattered reforms, the more the Hunter is attracted."

That's the paradox. The Anchor. The pieces want to gather. The gathering calls the Hunter. The Hunter wants to consume. To stop the Hunter, we have to stop gathering. But the pieces want to gather. The want is part of the math. It's not separate.

"Then the want is what calls the Hunter." Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out. "The desire for wholeness. The need to gather. That's what draws it."

The desire is part of the equation. Violet's presence was inside Ace. The Scattered wasn't just math. It was being. It wanted. It chose. The want is part of what it is. You can't remove it without removing the

being.

"Then the Hunter will always come." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "The pieces will always want to gather. The desire is inherent."

Unless we change the want. A pause. Unless we change what the pieces desire.

Youssef's Fragment stirred. The child's presence, confused, learning, wanting, pressed against the edge of consciousness.

What if the want changes? Youssef's presence pressed. What if the pieces don't want to gather? What if they want to stay scattered?

The math wants to be whole. Violet's presence shifted. The equation wants to reform. The pieces want to come together. That's inherent. It's not just desire. It's mathematics. The equation is most stable when it's complete.

But you learned to negotiate. Youssef. Pressing. Young and stubborn. You learned to hold. You learned to want something else.

I learned to want both. Violet's presence was inside Ace. I want to be whole. I also want Ace to be. I want the Scattered to reform. I also want the triad to hold. The want isn't binary. It's not either-or. It's both. And the negotiation is about holding both.

"Holding both." Ace's mechanical bird wound and unwound. "The desire to gather. And the desire to stay scattered. They coexist."

They coexist. A beat. The triad lock holds them together. The math is stable because the wanting is balanced. Not absent. Balanced.

Chen sat in the corner of the transport.

The collector, former collector, was learning to hold. The fragments inside them were stirring. Beginning to choose. Beginning to negotiate.

But the math was still wrong around them. The equations were still bent. Chen's presence was still a wound in reality, and wounds don't close just because you want them to.

"The fragments inside me are waking." Chen's voice was distorted. Harmonics. Resonance. "They're not... happy. They were consumed. Erased. Now they're being asked to choose. They're confused."

They were suspended. The Anchor. Calm. Not integrated. Not erased. Suspended. Now they're being offered a chance. They're angry. They're scared. They don't know how to negotiate.

"They don't trust me." Chen's presence was wrong. "I consumed them. I erased their hosts. Why would they trust me?"

They shouldn't trust you. Violet. Cold. You took their choice. You took their being. Now you're offering it back. They have every reason to doubt.

"Then how do I hold them? How do I negotiate?"

You don't. The Anchor's presence expanded. You let them negotiate. You let them choose. You don't hold them. You hold the space for them. You become the container. Not the controller.

Shammy's atmospheric sense felt the change.

The air around Chen was wrong. Distorted. The pressure systems didn't flow. The equations bent around them like water around a stone.

But something was shifting. The distortion was adjusting. Not healing. Learning. The math was responding to Chen's new intention, the way a wound responds to treatment, slowly, imperfectly.

"The fragments are responding to something." Shammy's warmth reached out. "The math around Chen is changing. Not healing. Shifting."

"They're beginning to choose." Mai pressed her hand flat. "The fragments inside Chen are beginning to negotiate. The suspended pieces are waking. They're deciding what they want."

And what they want is complicated. The Anchor. Calm. They want to be whole. But they also want to not be consumed. They want to gather. But they don't trust Chen. They want the Scattered to reform. But they don't want it to happen through erasure.

"Can Chen hold that?"

We'll see. Violet's presence was inside Ace. The negotiation is new. Chen is learning. The fragments are waking. The want is complicated. The holding is complicated. A pause. We'll see.

The Hunter's resonance signature spiked.

Not close. Present. The wounds in reality were still there. The scars were still open. And the Hunter was moving between them. Waiting.

"The gathering is accelerating." Mai. Precise. "The more pieces come together, the closer the Hunter gets. Chen has three pieces. We have three. Youssef has one. The more integrated the fragments become, the more the Hunter is attracted."

The Hunter is always attracted. Violet's presence pressed. It feeds on wholeness. The more whole the Scattered becomes, the more it wants to consume. But it also lives in the wounds. The scars. The places where reality is torn. We can close the wounds. We can heal the scars. But the Hunter will find new wounds.

"Then we need to become whole before it consumes us." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "We need to reform the Scattered. All the pieces. The full equation. And we need to become the architecture that holds. Before the Hunter catches up."

There are still pieces missing. The Anchor. Calm. Two fragments. Scattered. Dormant. Lost. We need to find them. Integrate them. Complete the equation. Before the Hunter returns. Before the wounds reopen.

The transport approached the next coordinates.

The Catalogue had shown the location. Not a person this time. A place. A containment site. Foundation archives. A fragment that had been held for decades.

"The sixth piece." Mai's tablet showed the records. "Not a host. A containment. A fragment that was never bound. Never integrated. It's been held in stasis since before the Scattered broke."

Impossible. Violet's presence was inside Ace. *Every fragment was bound. Every piece was scattered into a host. There are no unbound fragments.*

"The records say otherwise." Mai pressed her hand flat. "A fragment that was captured before the breaking. Before the Scattering. It was held in containment. Never integrated. Never scattered. It's the oldest piece. The first piece."

The first piece. The Anchor's presence shifted. Something old moved in it. *The one that was held before the decision to scatter. The one that didn't choose to break. It would still... want. It would still desire wholeness. But it would be... different. It would remember everything.*

The Foundation archives were underground.

Deep containment. Sterile. The air was dead. Shammy's atmospheric sense contracted to nothing. Mai's ritual mathematics faded. Even Ace's shadow-pressure was dampened, pressed flat, made small.

"The stasis field." Mai. Precise, but her voice was thinner here. "It's designed to suppress everything. Fragments. Rituals. Atmospheric manipulation. Everything that makes us... us."

Including the wanting. Violet's presence was muted. Distant. *I can feel it. The suppression. The desire is still there. But it's... quiet. Muffled.*

"That's why they kept it here." Chen's distorted voice was also dampened. Quieter. Less harmonics. "The fragment in stasis. If it never wanted, if it never gathered, it couldn't call the Hunter."

But it does want. The Anchor's presence was barely visible. A candle in a windstorm. *The want is inherent. The desire is part of the math. You can suppress it. You can muffle it. But you can't remove it. The fragment in stasis has been wanting for centuries. The presence flickered. The desire is... compressed. Pressurized.*

"And when we release it?"

The want will be... intense. The desire to gather. To be whole. It's been suppressed for so long. The release will be like... The Anchor searched. An explosion. Of want. Of need. Of the desire to be whole.

The containment chamber was at the lowest level.

A pod. Ancient. Mai could see the math around it now, the equations that held the fragment in stasis, the patterns that suppressed the desire. Centuries of containment written in the mathematics.

"This is why the Scattered broke." Mai pressed her hand flat against the pod. The metal was cold. Everything was cold. "This fragment was held. It was the first piece captured. The first piece that couldn't choose. The other pieces, they saw what happened. They saw what could be done to them. They decided to scatter before they could be captured."

The choice to break. The Anchor's presence was inside Ace. Faint but present. I remember now. The Scattered was whole. We were whole. Then the Hunter came. And then... the first capture. The first fragment held against its will. We saw what could happen. We chose to scatter before we could all be captured.

"And this fragment has been wanting to gather ever since." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded, fighting the suppression. "For centuries. The desire has been building. Pressurizing."

The want is... massive. The Anchor. The need to be whole. The need to join the other pieces. It's been suppressed. Contained. It's ready to explode.

"Can we integrate it safely?" Shammy's warmth was non-existent in the sterile air. Nothing to reach with. Nothing to feel. "Can we negotiate with something that's been wanting for centuries?"

We don't know. Violet's presence was muted. It's been held. It's been trapped. It didn't choose to scatter. It didn't choose to stay separate. It's been waiting. Wanting. The desire is... overwhelming.

"And the Hunter?" Mai. Precise. "If we release it, if we integrate it, the want will call the Hunter. The gathering will accelerate."

Yes. The Anchor's presence was inside Ace. *The Hunter will come. The wounds are open. The scars are there. The more whole we become, the closer it gets.*

"Then why release it?"

Because the Scattered isn't complete without it. Violet's presence pressed. Stronger now, even in the suppression. The equation is missing a piece. The math is unbalanced. Without this fragment, the Scattered can't reform completely. The triad lock can't hold. The architecture is incomplete.

"So we have to release it." Ace's shadow-pressure filled the space. "Even though the want will be overwhelming. Even though the Hunter will come."

We have to release it. The Anchor. And then we have to negotiate. The same way we negotiated with the burning fragment. The same way we negotiated with the Anchor. The want is there. But the choice is also there. The fragment has been trapped. A pause. It deserves to choose.

The containment pod was ancient.

Mai could see the math. The equations that held the fragment in stasis. The patterns that suppressed the desire. Centuries of mathematics, patient and terrible.

"The release has to be careful." Mai pressed her hand flat. "If we break the containment too fast, the want will explode. The fragment will... it won't be able to negotiate. It'll just want. Overwhelmingly. We have to release it slowly. Give it time to adjust."

Can we? Violet's presence was muted. The suppression field is holding. But it's been holding for centuries. The pressure is immense.

"We can try." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "The triad lock can hold the equation. Mai can see the math. Shammy can feel the pressure. We can ease the fragment out of stasis. Give it space to negotiate."

And if it doesn't want to negotiate? If the want is too strong?

"Then we hold." The mechanical bird in Ace's palm wound and unwound. "The triad lock holds. The architecture holds. We become the math that holds reality. And we give the fragment time to choose."

Chen's presence was still distorted.

But the fragments inside them were waking. Beginning to choose. Beginning to negotiate. Slowly. Like learning to walk after years of being chained.

"The fragments in me... they're seeing something they haven't seen in a long time." Chen's harmonics were different now. Less erasure. More negotiation. "They're seeing a choice. They're seeing that the being matters. That the math and the being are the same."

That's what negotiation looks like. The Anchor. Calm. The want is there. But the choice is also there. The fragment in stasis has been wanting for centuries. It deserves a chance to choose. Even if the want is overwhelming.

"And if it chooses to gather? If it chooses wholeness without negotiation?"

Then we hold. We become the architecture. We give it space. The same way we're giving you space. The same way we gave the burning fragment space. A beat. The want is part of the math. But the choice is also part of the math.

The containment pod began to open.

Slowly. Carefully. Mai's sight guided the equations. The stasis field released. The suppression lifted. The fragment inside...

It didn't explode. It didn't surge. It...

...waited.

What is it? Violet's presence was inside Ace. Why isn't it wanting?

Because it's been waiting. The Anchor. Calm. Old. It's been wanting for centuries. But it's also been alone. It's been suppressed. Contained. It doesn't know how to do anything else. It doesn't know how

to want. It just... is.

The fragment's presence was quiet. Not silent. Waiting. The desire was there. The need to gather. But it was patient. Centuries of suppression had compressed the want into something else. Something that could wait.

Hello. The fragment's presence was inside Ace now. Not demanding. Not overwhelming. Just present. I've been waiting.

The mechanical bird in Ace's palm.

Wind and unwind. The rhythm of tension and release.

You've been waiting for what?

To be whole. To gather. To join the other pieces. The presence shifted. Patient. Ancient. But I've also been waiting for... this. The chance to choose. The stasis field... it didn't just suppress the want. It gave me time. Time to think. Time to decide. Time to figure out what I want.

And what do you want?

I want to be whole. But I also want to choose how. A pause that lasted a breath and a century. I want to negotiate. I want to join the pieces that have learned to hold. I want to be part of the triad. Part of the math that holds reality together.

You've been waiting for centuries. And you've learned to negotiate?

I've learned that the want isn't everything. The fragment. Patient. The need to gather isn't the only thing. The being matters. The choice matters. I want to be whole. But I want to be whole in a way that includes the being. Includes the choice. Includes the negotiation.

The fragment integrated.

Not explosively. Not overwhelmingly. Patiently. The way it had waited. The way it had learned.

Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. The presence inside her was... more. The memories of the Anchor. The burning fragment's remnants. And now the first piece. The one that had been held before the breaking. The one that had learned to negotiate through centuries of waiting.

The Scattered is almost complete. The Anchor's presence was inside Ace. Four pieces. Chen has three. Youssef has one. Two more are scattered. Dormant. Lost. But we're closer. The equation is more balanced. The math is more stable.

"And the Hunter?"

The Hunter is coming. The gathering is accelerating. The want is stronger. A beat. But we're also becoming more stable. The triad lock is stronger. The architecture is more solid. The Hunter will come. But we're becoming something that can hold.

The mechanical bird ticked. Wind and unwind.

The rhythm was different now. More stable. More balanced. The want was there. The need to gather. But so was the choice. The negotiation. The being that holds the math.

Four pieces. Integrated. Negotiating. Learning to hold.

And somewhere, the Hunter was moving between wounds. Waiting for the moment to consume.

But the triad lock was stronger now. The architecture was more solid. And the Scattered was learning to be whole without losing itself.

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