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Chapter 2: Ritual Architecture

Rome from above was a city built on its own bones. Mai could see it in the way the streets layered, modern asphalt over medieval cobblestone over ancient Roman roads, each layer built on the assumption that what came before could be buried. Contained. Forgotten. The Tiber wound through the city like a scar, a brown ribbon visible from the air that had seen empires rise and fall, had carried sewage and sanctity, had flooded and receded more times than history recorded.

The Foundation field office was in the Trastevere district, tucked behind a church that had been consecrated, deconsecrated, and reconsecrated three times. The kind of history that left marks. The kind that knew what it meant to seal something away and pretend it never existed. Mai noted the details as they approached. Reinforcement bars integrated into medieval stonework. Containment arrays disguised as electrical conduits. Modern security hidden behind Renaissance facades.

The Foundation had learned to blend. In cities like Rome, blending was survival.

Shammy felt it as soon as they entered. The air here was different. Older. It carried weight that had nothing to do with atmosphere.

"Climate controlled," she murmured. Her storm-gradient hair was flat, unmoving. "The archives will be worse."

Mai's cold-focus expanded, stabilizing the space. "The Vatican keeps everything climate controlled. Paper preservation. Anomaly containment." Her fingers traced patterns on her tablet, already working equations. "They've been doing it longer than we have. Centuries of containment protocols layered on top of each other. Some still active. Some..." She paused, finger hovering over a data point. "Some intentionally forgotten."

Ace said nothing. She walked beside them, mechanical bird in her pocket, shadow-pressure contracted tight. Since the warehouse, she'd been quieter than usual. For Ace, that was saying something.

The field office interior was all clean lines and institutional gray. Foundation-standard. Mai recognized the patterns. Reinforced walls with containment materials disguised as standard concrete. Subtle ward-structures worked into the doorframes. She'd seen the same blueprints in Tokyo. In Prague. In every Foundation facility that dealt with things that shouldn't exist.

The briefing room door opened before they reached it. Dr. Bright's presence filled the threshold. Clinical. Institutional. The kind of calm that came from seeing too many things that shouldn't exist and deciding to catalog them anyway.

"Triad." He acknowledged each of them with a nod. "The situation has developed."

The holographic display showed a map of Vatican City. Red markers for breach points. Yellow for

manuscript locations. Blue for Foundation observation posts, positions Mai hadn't known existed until this moment.

"Three manuscripts stolen from the Secret Archives." Bright's voice was precise. Clinical. "The theft was discovered seventy-two hours ago. Vatican internal security conducted their initial assessment, then requested Foundation consultation. That request reached me six hours ago."

Mai's fingers had already started tracing rune-structures on the conference table. The pattern was familiar, containment architecture, but inverted. Where Foundation protocols built outward, creating layers of protection, this pattern moved inward. Compression rather than expansion.

"The Vatican requested our assistance." Mai didn't look up from the pattern. "That's unusual. They have their own containment protocols. Older than ours."

"Older and, in some cases, more effective." Bright's voice carried no judgment. "The Holy See has been dealing with anomalous phenomena since before the Foundation existed. Their methods differ from ours. Their priorities differ. But their containment records are extensive."

"Extensive enough to lose three manuscripts?" Shammy's hair lifted slightly. The climate-controlled air resisted her, but her atmospheric sense found currents anyway. "Someone got past their security."

"Someone got past eight hundred years of accumulated ward-structure." Bright pulled up another display, schematic diagrams of the archive's containment architecture. "Layered protocols. Some dating to the thirteenth century. Some considerably older."

Mai looked at the schematics. Her fingers traced the pattern again. Stopped.

"This isn't Foundation-standard containment architecture." Her voice was precise. "This is ritual architecture. The kind that requires maintenance. The kind that requires intent."

"The Vatican's containment protocols are built on different principles than ours." Bright's voice remained neutral. "We build machines that hold. They build meanings that exclude. The distinction matters."

"Meanings that exclude." Mai's cold-focus contracted slightly. "The manuscripts are Catholic documents?"

"The manuscripts are anomalous objects that the Vatican has contained for centuries. Their provenance varies. Their danger profile varies. What they share is a classification in the Vatican's internal catalog. The Fragment Catalogue, Volume Seven."

Ace's shadow-pressure spiked.

"Violet," she said.

One word.

Bright nodded. "Records of bound entities. Including one marked 'Violet'. The manuscript contains descriptions. Containment protocols. Partial translation of the entity's communication patterns. Everything the Vatican learned about your Fragment over the centuries they've been aware of it."

The mechanical bird in Ace's pocket started ticking. She hadn't touched it.

"The Codex Umbra." Bright pulled up another file. "Thirteenth century. A guilt-memetic text. The manuscript rewrites itself based on the reader's guilt. Shows them what they've buried. Some readers have been found weeping over pages that, to others, appear blank. Some catatonic. Some dead, hearts stopped, faces serene."

Mai's fingers stopped moving on the table. "Guilt-memetic. Psychological containment via trauma revelation."

"That's one interpretation. The Codex has been in Vatican custody since 1248. Taken from a Venetian trader who reported that the book followed him. Not physically. Mentally. He couldn't stop thinking about it. Couldn't stop seeing what it showed him." Bright paused. "The Vatican's assessment: the book doesn't show you your guilt. It makes you feel it until you either resolve it or break."

"The thief's signature." Mai pulled up the Prague data on her tablet, cross-referencing with Foundation databases. "It matches a classification from forty years ago. A breach classification."

"The Blood-Moon Event." Bright's voice was careful. Controlled. "We know."

Ace's hand moved to her katanas. Not drawing. Just touching. Grounding.

"What else do you know?" Four words. Flat.

Bright paused. The kind of pause that meant he was choosing how much to say. Mai recognized it from Tokyo, when the equation didn't solve cleanly, when the variables included things that couldn't be quantified.

"The Vatican archives contain records of every known Fragment-related event for the past eight hundred years. The Blood-Moon Event is one of many. But it's one of the few that included a survivor." His voice was clinical, but not unkind. "You're the only Fragment host we've found who survived initial integration without containment support. You're also the only one who's remained stable for this long. The Fragment Catalogue contains the Vatican's notes on your case. Notes that someone else with a Fragment-class signature now has access to."

Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out, reading the room. Stable. Controlled. But under the control, something else.

"They're looking for information," Shammy said. "Not power. Not territory. Information about Fragment hosts."

"The manuscripts are the information." Bright's hologram shifted. "Codex Umbra shows readers their guilt, a psychological profile tool. The Silence Protocol describes how to create Silent Vessels, human containers designed to hold anomalous entities without being consumed. The Fragment Catalogue lists what's been bound, where, when, and by whom."

"Including what's inside me." Not a question.

"Including Violet." Bright didn't look away. "And forty-seven other documented Fragment entities. The thief may know something about your Fragment that you don't. Or they may be looking for the same answers you are. The intelligence we have is incomplete."

Mai traced the rune-structures again. The containment architecture of the Vatican. The theft method. The target selection. The variables aligned in ways that suggested preparation. Long-term preparation.

"The anomaly in Prague." Mai's voice was precise. "It said 'the scattered pieces are waking up.' The manuscripts are about scattering. Binding. Containment. If someone is trying to understand Fragment hosts, how they work, how they survive, how they're created, these are the texts they'd need."

"Why steal them?" Shammy asked. "Why not copy them?"

"The manuscripts are anomalous themselves." Mai's fingers stopped. "You can't photograph them. Can't transcribe them. The Codex Umbra resists all forms of reproduction, pages appear blank to cameras, text shifts when transcribed. The Silence Protocol is written in a script that exists only within the document itself, the letters aren't any known language, but readers report understanding the meaning. The Fragment Catalogue..." She checked her tablet. "The Fragment Catalogue is cataloged but not described. The Vatican's records indicate that reading it causes... complications. The thief needed physical access. Physical proximity."

"Which means the thief needed to be in the Vatican Secret Archives in person." Bright's voice shifted. "That's where you come in. The Vatican is allowing Foundation assistance under specific conditions. Limited access. Limited time. And the Vatican Guard will be watching. They don't trust us."

"They don't trust anyone." Ace's shadow-pressure pressed against the walls. "What's the real mission?"

Bright paused again. Mai recognized it. The equation with variables that couldn't be quantified.

"Foundation intelligence suggests the Vatican has been creating Fragment hosts. Not just documenting them. Creating them. The manuscripts may contain evidence of that process. Methods. Protocols. Names." His voice was neutral. "If true, it changes everything we thought we knew about Fragment containment. It means the Vatican hasn't just been studying these entities. It means they've been making them."

Silence.

"The thief isn't just stealing information." Mai's voice was precise. "They're stealing evidence."

"Or they're trying to replicate it." Bright's voice was clinical. "We don't know. What we know is that someone with a Fragment-class signature broke into the Vatican Secret Archives and took documents about Fragment creation. Someone who's been carrying long enough to develop deep integration. Someone who can destabilize molecular bonds with intent. And you're the only team with a Fragment host who can track them."

Mai looked at the schematics again. The containment architecture. The breach points. The pattern was becoming clearer.

"Deep integration." Mai's fingers traced the table. "The thief has been integrated with their Fragment for decades. Long enough to develop control that most hosts never achieve. Long enough to survive."

"The Blood-Moon Event was forty years ago." Bright's voice was careful. "We don't know if the thief is a survivor of that specific event. But the signature matches. The timeline matches. The method matches."

"Someone like me." Flat. "Someone who made it this far."

"Someone who wants to know how." Bright's voice softened slightly. Professional, but with something underneath. "The note we found at the Prague site. 'The scattered pieces are waking up.' If Fragment

hosts are surviving longer, developing deeper integration, waking up to what they carry, then someone is looking for answers. Someone is trying to understand the pattern. The manuscripts contain pieces of that pattern. The thief is collecting them.”

Mai's tablet showed the cross-reference. The Prague data. The Foundation databases. The Vatican breach patterns. She traced the rune-structure on the table again, her fingers working through the equation while her mind processed the variables.

“The pattern is containment architecture,” she said. “The theft method. The breach points. The molecular destabilization of the locks. It's not random. Not opportunistic. The thief knew exactly where to go, exactly what to take, exactly how to extract. This wasn't a robbery. It was an extraction.”

“Planned.” Ace's shadow-pressure settled. “Years of preparation.”

“Minimum of three years to develop deep integration bond.” Mai's voice was precise. “But the molecular destabilization signature suggests longer. Much longer. Someone who's been working with their Fragment for decades. Someone who's learned to use what they're carrying.”

“Someone who survived.” Shammy's atmospheric sense was straining against the sterile air. “That's the question, isn't it? How do you survive carrying something like that? How do you stay... you?”

“That's what the thief is trying to find out.” Bright's hologram displayed a final file. “The Fragment Catalogue contains the Vatican's documentation of every known Fragment host. Every containment attempt. Every success. Every failure. It's a record of what happens to people who carry these entities. Most don't survive. Some do. The ones who do, there's no pattern. No clear methodology. Just... survival.”

“And someone wants to understand that survival.” Mai's fingers stopped moving. “Enough to break into one of the most secure archives in existence. Enough to steal documents that can't be reproduced. Enough to leave a message.”

She looked at Bright.

“You didn't mention the message.”

Bright's expression didn't change. “The Vatican Guard found a page at the third breach site. Handwritten. Placed deliberately. We believe the thief left it for whoever followed.”

“What did it say?”

Bright pulled up an image. A single page, handwritten in careful script:

You survived. I need to know how.

Ace's shadow-pressure contracted.

The Vatican Secret Archives were everything Shammy couldn't do.

Climate-controlled. Sealed. Sterile. The air had been processed so many times it forgot what air was supposed to feel like. Her atmospheric sense compressed, reaching for currents that weren't there. The archives didn't breathe. They preserved. Every molecule held in place by centuries of

containment architecture.

“Deep breaths,” Mai murmured. Her cold-focus stabilized the space around Shammy. “I've got you.”

Shammy nodded. Her hair was completely flat. The storm-gradient usually lifted slightly in response to atmospheric pressure, but here there was no pressure to respond to. Just dead, controlled air. Air that had been stripped of everything that made it alive.

“The containment architecture is different than Foundation-standard.” Mai's tablet displayed the archive's structure. “The Vatican doesn't just seal things away. They sanctify the space. The meaning of the containment is part of the containment. The locks aren't just physical. They're theological.”

“Theological locks.” Ace's voice was flat. “Meaning what?”

“Meaning the containment requires belief to maintain. Foundation protocols work regardless of who's holding the keys. Vatican protocols require someone who believes in what the keys represent.” Mai traced the pattern on her tablet. “This archive has been tended by the same order for six centuries. Every successor trained by the previous keeper. Every transfer of belief reinforcing the containment.”

“So when they steal something.” Shammy's voice was tight. The sterile air was affecting her more now. “They're not just taking an object. They're breaking a chain of belief.”

“The chain is already broken.” Mai's voice was precise. “The Vatican requested our assistance. That means they've acknowledged that their containment architecture is compromised. They've acknowledged that they need outside help. The belief that maintained these locks for centuries, whatever that belief was, it's no longer enough to hold.”

Ace walked ahead, her shadow-pressure expanding to fill the sterile space. Where Shammy's power compressed, Ace's expanded. The void-weight she carried made the archive's endless rows feel deeper.

“Three manuscripts.” Mai's tablet displayed the catalog. “The Codex Umbra was stored in the thirteenth-century wing. The Silence Protocol in the Renaissance section. The Fragment Catalogue in the modern containment annex.”

“Stored where?” Flat. “Now.”

“The thief left evidence.” Mai led them through the archive, tracing the architecture with her tablet. “Ritual signatures. Containment patterns. The same classification we found in Prague.”

They walked through corridors that had held secrets for centuries. The air smelled of old paper and preservation spells. Shammy's breathing was shallow, her atmospheric sense straining. Mai kept her cold-focus active, stabilizing the space around her teammate.

“The Codex Umbra first.” Mai stopped at a vault door. Reinforced. Warded. Open.

The vault was empty. The shelf where the Codex had been stored had a single mark. A burn pattern, shaped like a hand.

Ace knelt. Her shadow-pressure pressed against the shelf, reading the residue. “The thief touched it. Bare hands. No gloves.”

“Why?” Shammy's voice was tight.

"Guilt-memetic." Mai traced the burn pattern. "The Codex shows readers their guilt. Touching it directly would..."

"Show them something." Ace stood. "Or take something."

"Or both." Mai's fingers traced patterns on the vault wall. "The signature here matches Prague. Fragment-class. But older. More stable."

"Someone who's been carrying longer." Flat. "Someone who survived."

The second vault was different. The Silence Protocol had been stored in a section that felt colder. Older. The wards here were stronger. The containment signatures thicker. The air itself seemed to resist passage.

Shammy stopped at the threshold. "The air is wrong."

Mai looked up from her tablet. "What do you mean?"

"Wrong." Shammy's hair was flat, but she could still feel something. "Not sterile. Claimed. Something was here. Something that doesn't want us to find it."

Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "The thief."

"No." Shammy shook her head. "Something else. Something older than the theft."

The vault door was reinforced iron. The lock had been melted. Not broken. Melted.

Mai knelt, examining the metal. "Molecular destabilization. The thief didn't pick the lock. They destabilized the bonds holding the metal together. Turned solid into liquid without heat. Without visible energy transfer."

"Fragment ability?" Ace asked.

"Someone with that kind of control..." Mai stood. "That's not just carrying a Fragment. That's integrating with one. Deep integration. The kind of bond that takes decades to develop."

Ace's mechanical bird started ticking in her pocket. She hadn't touched it.

"Violet," she said. Not to the team. To the Fragment inside her.

What do you know about deep integration?

The Fragment didn't answer. But the shadow-pressure around Ace fluctuated. Violet was stirring.

The third vault. The Fragment Catalogue. The modern containment annex. The newest section of the oldest archive.

Empty too. But here, the thief had left something behind.

A single page, torn from a newer manuscript. Handwritten. Placed deliberately on the empty shelf.

Ace picked it up. Her shadow-pressure protected her hands from the paper's resonance.

The words were clear. Written in a hand that knew what it was doing.

You survived. I need to know how.

She showed it to Mai and Shammy.

"Survived what?" Shammy's voice was tight.

"The Blood-Moon Event." Ace's voice was flat. "Someone else was there."

Mai took a photo of the page with her tablet, analyzing the handwriting. "The ink composition is modern. The paper is older. Someone wrote this recently, on paper that was already here. The handwriting shows controlled tremor. Someone with deep integration, but not complete stability. The Fragment is still... present."

"A message." Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. "For me."

"For Fragment hosts." Mai's fingers traced patterns on her tablet. "The thief isn't just stealing manuscripts. They're leaving messages. Looking for information about Fragment survival. About deep integration. About what happens when you carry something like this for decades."

"They're asking questions." Shammy's atmospheric sense was straining. "Questions about people like you."

Ace looked at the empty shelf where the Fragment Catalogue had been. The catalogue that listed Violet. The record of what she was carrying.

"The thief knows what I am." Flat. "They want to know how I'm still alive."

She put the page in her pocket. The mechanical bird kept ticking. The sterile air pressed around them.

And somewhere in the archive, something was watching.

Shammy felt it before she saw it. The air currents, dead in the sterile environment, suddenly shifted. A void in the pressure. A space where something was absorbing atmosphere instead of moving through it.

"Something's here."

Mai's cold-focus snapped to combat readiness. "Where?"

"Everywhere." Shammy's hair lifted slightly. Not from atmosphere. From fear. "The air is being consumed."

Ace's katanas cleared the sheaths. The frequency-hum filled the corridor. Shadow-pressure expanding, making the archive feel endless and tiny at the same time.

The lights flickered.

Stabilized.

Flickered again.

“The climate control.” Mai's voice was precise. “Something is drawing power.”

“Show yourself.” Not a request.

The air at the far end of the corridor rippled. Not visibly. Visibly, nothing happened. But the space felt different. Like someone had pressed a hand against reality and left a dent.

Then it was gone.

The lights stabilized. The air returned to its sterile stillness. The shadow in the corridor vanished.

But the mechanical bird in Ace's pocket was ticking faster now. And Violet, the Fragment she carried, was very, very quiet.

“What was that?” Shammy's voice was tight.

“A warning.” Ace sheathed her katanas. “Or a message.”

“The thief.” Mai's tablet showed power fluctuations throughout the archive. “Or something else.”

“They know we're here.” Ace's shadow-pressure settled. “They wanted us to find the note. They wanted us to know they're watching.”

Shammy's atmospheric sense slowly returned as the sterile air stabilized. “The question is what they want.”

“They want to know how I survived.” Flat. “The question is why.”

Dr. Bright's voice came through the secure channel as they exited the archive.

“Report.”

Mai answered, precise. “Three manuscripts confirmed stolen. Codex Umbra, Silence Protocol, Fragment Catalogue Volume Seven. Thief left a message. 'You survived. I need to know how.' The containment architecture shows molecular destabilization consistent with deep Fragment integration. The signatures match Prague. The pattern suggests long-term preparation. Years, possibly decades.”

Bright was silent for a moment. “The message is for Ace.”

“Yes.” Flat. “Someone else who survived the Blood-Moon Event.”

“Or someone who's studied it.” Bright's voice was clinical. “The Vatican archives contain records of every known Fragment-related event for the past eight hundred years. If the thief has been researching...”

“They've been preparing for a long time.” Mai's fingers traced patterns on her tablet. “The molecular destabilization we found. That's not spontaneous. That's practiced. Someone who's spent years learning to control what they carry.”

“A Fragment host who's been integrated for decades.” Shammy's voice was recovering now that they

were out of the sterile environment. "Someone who's learned to use what they're carrying. Someone who survived long enough to develop that kind of control."

"The question isn't just what they want." Ace's shadow-pressure pressed against the evening air. "The question is what they're willing to do to get it."

"Be careful." Bright's voice was careful. "The Vatican is watching. The thief is watching. And you're the only Fragment host in the city who can track either of them."

"We're always careful." Mai's voice was precise.

"No." Bright's pause was deliberate. "You're always competent. Careful is different."

The line went dead.

Ace's mechanical bird was ticking in her pocket. She wound it once, feeling the spring compress. Tension and release. The rhythm she'd used since she was a child.

"We have a location." Mai's tablet showed a map. "The burn pattern in the first vault. I can trace the molecular destabilization signature. It won't give us the thief's current position, but it will tell us where they've been."

"The archive." Shammy's hair lifted in the evening air. "We already know they've been there."

"No." Mai's voice was precise. "The signature is older than the theft. The thief has been in the archive before. Years ago. The pattern is residual. Someone's been planning this for a very long time."

"Years of preparation." Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. "This isn't a spontaneous theft. It's an extraction. Planned."

"Then let's find the plan." Mai started walking. "I can trace the signature to wherever it originated. It won't be easy. It won't be fast. But it's a thread."

Ace fell into step beside her. Mechanical bird in her pocket. Shadow-pressure making the evening feel smaller. Shammy followed, her atmospheric sense expanding now that she was out of the sterile environment.

The triad moved through Rome's evening streets. Depth, Horizontal, Vertical. Three vectors aligned against something that had been planning for years.

Somewhere in the city, a thief with a Fragment inside them was watching. Waiting. Asking questions about survival.

And the only person who could answer those questions was carrying a Fragment of her own.

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