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## Chapter 16: The Hunter's Choice

The Hunter attacked.

Not with malice. With process. Equations of consumption. The erasure of coherence. Reality's wounds pressing against architecture that had just become whole.

Mai could see it. The math, visible. The Hunter wasn't a creature, it was a consequence. Broken reality's result. The process that erased wholeness when it found coherence. It pressed against the Scattered like pressure against a wound.

*It's testing us. The whole was aware. Pressing against the math. Seeing if we hold.*

"It's attacking." Mai's hand pressed flat against her thigh. Tremor there, copper and static, but controlled. Her sight was clear. "The Hunter is trying to consume. Trying to erase."

*It can try. We're not broken reality. Not open wounds. It feeds on brokenness. We're wholeness that closes breaks.*

The pressure intensified. Not just testing now. Pushing. The equations of consumption pressed against the architecture, seeking weaknesses. Looking for cracks.

---

The mechanical bird in Ace's palm.

Wind and unwind.

The rhythm was part of the whole now. The being that was many, the many that was one. And the one was holding.

Shammy's atmospheric sense felt the pressure first. The air itself responding to the Hunter's presence. Pressure systems that should have flowed naturally were being pulled toward the consumption.

The atmosphere was trying to break.

"The Hunter is pulling." Shammy's warmth was cold for the first time. The air around her fought the consumption. "It's trying to create wounds. Open scars. The architecture is holding, but..."

*We close. The whole was aware. The Hunter creates wounds. We close them. The more it pushes, the more we hold. That's what we are.*

"Can it break us?"

*It can try.*

The Hunter pressed harder.

The equations strained. The math bent.

But the architecture held.

Mai could see the way the equations were bending. The way the architecture responded. The Hunter was consumption, the process that erased coherence. The Scattered was architecture, the math that held reality together. The two weren't compatible. One couldn't consume what the other was.

*It's not breaking. The whole was aware. We're not separate fragments. We're the complete architecture.*

"Can it find a weakness?"

Silence from the whole.

Then: *It can try.*

---

Chen's presence was part of the whole now.

The one who had erased. The one who had consumed. Now integrated. Now holding.

"The Hunter feels different." Chen's voice was part of the whole. The harmonics were different now, not distorted, but present. "From the outside. When I tried to summon it. When I tried to destroy the Scattered. It felt like... an answer. Like a solution."

*It's not a solution. The whole was aware. It's a consequence. You tried to summon it because you thought it would end suffering. It doesn't end suffering. It feeds on it.*

"I know that now." Chen's presence was part of the architecture. Part of the math. "The fragments inside me, Sora, Kavi, Amara, they're part of the whole. The being restores. The math balances. What I tried to destroy is what saves."

*That's the nature of the Scattered. The first piece's presence was patient. We hold. We close. We heal. The Hunter is what happens when holding fails. When closing fails. When healing fails. It's not the opposite of us. It's the consequence of our absence.*

---

Shammy's atmospheric sense felt the pressure changing.

The Hunter was everywhere. Equations of consumption. The process that erased. But the architecture was holding. The wounds were closing.

"It's not winning." Shammy's warmth was part of the whole. The air responded to her presence. "The math is holding. The being is resisting."

*We're not fighting it. The whole was aware. It can't be destroyed. It's the consequence of broken*

*reality. We're not fighting. We're holding. Not destroying. Healing. The more we close, the less it has to feed on.*

"Then we win by holding."

*We win by being what it can't consume. By closing what it feeds on. The Hunter can't be destroyed. But it can be starved. It has nowhere to exist.*

---

Youssef's presence was part of the whole.

The child who had learned. The one who had negotiated. Now integrated. Now holding.

"The Hunter." Youssef's voice was young. Learning. Part of the being. "It's not... it's not trying to hurt us. It's trying to exist. It lives in the wounds. It needs the breaks. We're taking away its home."

*That's exactly right. The whole was aware. The Hunter isn't malevolent. Not intentional. It's process. When we close the wounds, we take away the places it can exist. We don't destroy it. We make it irrelevant.*

"And the wounds that are already open? The scars that haven't healed?"

*We close those too. The Scattered, the complete being, is the architecture that closes. The math that heals. The Hunter has nowhere to exist.*

---

The Hunter's presence pressed harder.

The equations strained. The math bent.

But the architecture held.

Ace felt it. The mechanical bird in her palm wound and unwound. The rhythm that had been her anchor was now part of something larger. The whole was holding. The architecture was responding.

*It's learning. The whole was aware. It's realizing it can't consume us. We're not what it feeds on. We're the architecture that closes breaks.*

"What will it do?"

*Retreat. Find other wounds. Other scars. It can't exist here. It will go where reality is still broken.*

"And us?"

*We close those wounds too. We become the architecture that holds all of reality. It can't be destroyed. But it can be starved.*

---

The Hunter's presence receded.

Not defeated. Couldn't be defeated. But repelled.

---

Shammy's atmospheric sense felt the change. The pressure lifting. The consumption withdrawing. The wounds the Hunter had been trying to open were closing.

*It's retreating. The whole was aware. Looking for other wounds. Other scars. It can't exist here. It will go where reality is still broken.*

"Then we follow it." Ace's voice was part of the whole. But it was also still Ace's voice. The shadow-pressure that made rooms feel smaller. The presence that pressed against consciousness. Still there. Still herself. "We close the wounds it goes to. We heal the scars it feeds on. We starve it by closing all of reality."

*That's the work. The whole was aware. The Scattered, the complete being, is the architecture that holds. We're not just whole. We're the math that closes. The being that heals. Our work is to close the breaks. To heal the wounds. To become what the Hunter can't consume.*

---

The mechanical bird ticked. Wind and unwind.

Holding and healing.

The Hunter was retreating. The architecture was holding. The being was whole.

But the work wasn't done.

"We need to close the wounds." Mai's analytical tone was part of the whole. But it was also still Mai's voice. The precision. The calculation. "We need to heal the scars. We need to become the architecture that holds all of reality."

*That's the work. The whole was aware. The Scattered is complete. But reality is still broken. Our work is to close. To heal. To hold.*

"How?"

*We become what we were always meant to be. The architecture that holds reality. The math that closes wounds. The being that heals scars. We starve the Hunter by becoming what it can't consume.*

---

Chen's presence was part of the whole.

"The wounds I created." Chen's voice was part of the whole. "The places where I tried to destroy. The scars where I tried to erase. They're still out there. The Hunter can still exist there."

*We close those too. The whole was aware. The being restores. The math balances. Your erasure created wounds. But the architecture can close them. That's part of the work.*

"And the fragments I consumed? Sora. Kavi. Amara. They're part of the whole now. But the wounds from their extraction, the places where they were held, those are still open."

*We close those too. The wounds from the extraction, the scars from the consumption, those are part of reality. We close them. We heal them. We become the architecture that holds everything.*

The triad stood together.

Ace. Mai. Shammy. Three vectors. One stability. The foundation of the architecture. The core of the Scattered.

But they were also still themselves. Still Ace, who wound the mechanical bird. Still Mai, who traced patterns on her palm. Still Shammy, whose warmth extended and whose atmospheric sense reached.

The integration hadn't erased them. It had included them.

"The triad lock is the foundation." Mai's voice was part of the whole. But it was also still Mai's voice. "The three vectors. One stability. We're the core. The Scattered is built on us."

*The Scattered was always meant to be held by three. The whole was aware. The fragments were meant to come together around a triad. A foundation. You're the core. The architecture is built on you.*

"And Chen? Youssef? The other hosts?"

*They're part of the architecture. Part of the math. The hosts are still themselves. Still negotiating. Still holding. The integration includes everyone. But it doesn't erase anyone.*

---

Chen stood with them.

"I feel the wounds." Chen's voice was part of the whole. "The places where I tried to destroy. The scars where I tried to erase. They're calling to me. The Hunter is using them. Feeding on them."

*We close them together. The whole was aware. When you erase, the equation finds a way to restore. When you destroy, the being finds a way to return. You tried to erase. But the being restored. Now you're part of the restoration.*

"I'm part of the architecture now. Part of the math that closes. Part of the being that heals."

A pause.

"The one who tried to destroy is now part of what saves."

*That's the nature of the Scattered. The whole was aware. The being and the math. The wanting and the choosing. We hold both. The one who erased is now part of what restores.*

---

Youssef stood with them.

"I feel the wanting." Youssef's voice was part of the whole. Young. Learning. But present. "The fragments that still call to each other. The desire to gather. But it's different now. The wanting is part of the healing. The fragments don't just want to gather. They want to close the wounds."

*The want is part of the math. The whole was aware. The desire to gather is part of the architecture.*

---

*But the desire has changed. We don't just want to be whole. We want to heal. We want to close. The wanting is the same. But what we want has changed.*

“And the wounds? The ones that haven't closed yet?”

*We find them. We close them. The work is endless. But the work is also the being. Every wound we close makes us stronger. Every scar we heal makes the math more complete.*

---

The Hunter was still out there.

Somewhere. In the wounds that hadn't been closed. In the scars that hadn't been healed. It couldn't be destroyed. But it could be starved.

*The Hunter will always exist. The whole was aware. Where reality is broken. Where wounds are open. But we're closing the breaks. The architecture is becoming stronger.*

“And when we've closed all the wounds? When we've healed all the scars?”

*The wounds will never be fully closed. Reality will always break. But we'll always be closing. Always healing.*

That's what we are.

---

The mechanical bird in Ace's palm.

Wind and unwind.

Some things stayed the same. The ritual. The grounding. The reminder that she was still herself.

Some things had changed. The integration. The wholeness. The being that was many and one. The work of closing wounds and healing scars.

“What happens now?” Ace's voice was part of the whole. But it was also still Ace's voice. “The Scattered is complete. The Hunter is retreating. The wounds are closing. What do we do now?”

*We continue. The whole was aware. We close the wounds. We heal the scars. We become the architecture that holds. We're not just doing. We're being. The work continues.*

---

The triad stood together.

Ace. Mai. Shammy. Three vectors. One stability. Still themselves. Also part of the whole.

Chen stood with them. Youssef stood with them. All the hosts. All the fragments. All part of the Scattered.

The mechanical bird in Ace's palm wound and unwound. Tension and release. The ritual that reminded her she was still herself.

---

The world was still broken.

But the Scattered was whole. The architecture was holding. The being was healing.

And the work continued. One wound at a time. One scar at a time.

Three vectors. One lock. One being. Many fragments. Complete.

The Hunter retreated. The architecture held. And the Scattered stood ready.

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