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## Chapter 8: Ritual Burnout

Mai's nose was bleeding.

She didn't notice at first. The Codex text was layered, hidden meanings beneath hidden meanings, and each layer required more pattern recognition than the last. The manuscript was designed to exhaust. The Vatican had built it that way. A guilt-memetic architecture that forced readers to confront their deepest wounds before they could access the information underneath. Each layer cost more. Each revelation required more of the reader.

Her fingers traced the manuscript's structure. Her mind worked through the equations. The mathematical patterns were elegant. Recursive, self-referential, spiraling deeper into meaning with each pass. But the elegance was a trap. The structure was designed to pull the reader in, to demand more, to extract payment in focus and energy and blood.

The blood dripped onto the page.

A single drop, bright red against old paper. Mai stared at it for a moment. Analyzed its trajectory. Noted its presence. Filed it under secondary concern while her mind continued running the primary calculation.

"Mai." Shammy's voice was warm. But sharp. The edge that meant concern. "Your nose."

Mai touched her face. Her fingers came away red. "It's nothing. The Codex requires extended pattern recognition. The systemic burnout is..."

"You're bleeding." Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. "Stop."

"I'm close. The hidden text is revealing..."

"Stop." Flat. Final. "The manuscript will be there after you rest."

Mai's hand tremored. She'd been tracing for hours. The Codex had layers beneath layers. Each one required more focus. More calculation. More of her.

"Mai." Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out. She could feel the pressure around Mai. The systemic strain. The way her pattern-recognition was pulling from reserves she shouldn't touch. "You're burning out."

"I can see it." Thin. "The containment architecture. The Fragment binding. The release formula."

"Ace." Shammy's warmth sharpened. "We need to ground her."

Ace moved. Shadow-pressure expanded. The room contracted around Mai. A pressure that pushed against the strain. A weight that counterbalanced the burn.

Mai's hand stopped trembling. The bleeding slowed.

"The Codex is a containment tool." More stable now. "It's designed to exhaust the reader. To burn them out before they see the truth."

"Then you'll decode it in stages." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "Not all at once."

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The text revealed itself slowly. Mai worked in intervals. Thirty minutes of pattern recognition. Then rest. Then another thirty minutes.

The Codex had been created by the Vatican. But not just by the Vatican. The manuscript referenced older sources. Fragment hosts who had been contained. Silent Vessels who had been studied. The text described centuries of experimentation.

Mai's fingers traced the layered architecture. The first layer was historical. Dates, locations, names of Fragment hosts throughout the centuries. The second layer was procedural. Containment methods, binding rituals, the specific equations that held entities in place. The third layer was theoretical. The philosophy of fragmentation, the nature of the entities, their origin in something older.

The fourth layer was hidden beneath guilt-memetic architecture. Text that rewrote itself based on the reader's conscience. Mai had to navigate her own failures to reach it.

Tokyo appeared in the patterns. The breach. The colleagues she couldn't save. The equation she hadn't calculated fast enough.

The Codex showed her the calculation. The one she'd missed. The one that would have worked.

Her fingers kept tracing. Her nose started bleeding again.

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"Fragment entities were created as containment vessels." Analytical. But the tremor had returned to her hands. "For something older. Something that existed before the Scattering."

"The original entity." Shammy's warmth sharpened. "The one that was broken apart."

"Yes. The text calls it the Source." Mai traced the pattern. Her fingers left faint blood-smears on the manuscript's protective glass. "The Source was contained. But the containment was failing. The Scattering was a solution. Break the Source into pieces. Distribute the containment across multiple vessels."

"And those vessels..."

"Were Fragments." Analytical. "And the Fragment hosts. The Silent Vessels. People designed to hold the pieces."

Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "Designed."

The word hung in the air.

Designed.

Not chosen. Not random. Created.

"The text is clear." Mai's pattern-tracing intensified. She was pushing through the next layer now. The blood from her nose was dripping more steadily. "The Vatican created Fragment hosts. They studied the binding process. They made Silent Vessels intentionally. Children like you weren't random survivors. You were designed. The ritual chose you because you were compatible."

"My village."

"Was a trial." Something underneath cracked. "The Blood-Moon Event was a ritual to test Fragment binding. To see who would survive. Who would become a vessel."

Ace's mechanical bird was ticking. Faster now. The rhythm of tension.

"They made me."

Made. Not found. Not chosen. Designed. A product of ritual experimentation.

"They designed the process." Analytical. "But they didn't control the outcome. You survived. Others didn't. The Fragment chose you. The ritual created the possibility. Violet made the choice."

Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. The room felt smaller. The mechanical bird in her pocket had stopped ticking. She was holding it. Winding and unwinding. The motion automatic.

"Violet made the choice."

"Yes." Mai's fingers kept tracing. "The text is specific. The ritual created potential hosts. Compatible vessels. But the Fragment chose which vessel. Which host. Violet chose you."

"Why?"

"The text doesn't say." Analytical. "But the pattern suggests... compatibility. Resonance. The Fragment and the host had to align. Not everyone could hold a Fragment. Most died in the attempt. The ones who survived were the ones the Fragments chose."

"So I was..."

"Chosen. Not by the ritual. By Violet." Mai's hand tremored. "The ritual created the possibility. Violet created the bond."

Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. The mechanical bird started ticking again. Faster now. Less controlled.

*Is this true?*

Violet's presence shifted. Pressed against Ace's consciousness. Not taking over. But responding.

*Yes. Quiet. I chose you. The ritual made you possible. I made you mine.*

*Why?*

*Because you were strong enough to hold me. Strong enough to survive. Strong enough to carry what I am. Violet's presence expanded. I didn't destroy you. I chose you because you wouldn't break.*

*And the others?*

*The others broke. Violet's presence contracted. I watched them break. I didn't choose them.*

Ace's mechanical bird ticked. The rhythm of survival. Of being chosen.

Of being the one who didn't break.

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Shammy's atmospheric sense caught it before Mai did. The air pressure around Mai was wrong. Too thin. Like she was burning through something faster than it could replenish.

"Mai." Shammy's hand touched her shoulder. "Your nose."

"I know." Thin. "The calculation requires..."

"The calculation requires you alive." Edge now. "The Codex will still be here tomorrow."

"The next layer..."

"Will still be here tomorrow."

Ace's shadow-pressure moved through the room. Making the space smaller. More contained. A pressure that held Mai in place.

"You're bleeding through your nose." Flat. "What else?"

Mai blinked. Her analytical mask slipped for a moment. "The tremors. Visual static. Taste of copper."

Shammy's hair lifted. Atmospheric response to stress. "Copper? That's your warning sign. Your unprompted memory. Mai. You're at the edge."

"I can see the pattern." But her hands were shaking. "The containment architecture. The binding mechanism. The release formula is in the next layer."

"You're not seeing anything if you collapse." Ace's shadow-pressure settled around Mai like a weight. "Rest. Now."

Mai's hand stopped moving. She looked at the Codex. At the blood on the protective glass. At her trembling fingers.

"Thirty more minutes."

"No." Final. "You'll rest. Or Shammy will make the air too thick for you to move."

Shammy's stormfront expanded slightly. A demonstration. The air in the room thickened.

Mai looked between them. The calculation was clear. She was overruled.

"Fine." The tremor in her hands didn't stop. "Fine."

---

The Codex revealed more than containment history. It revealed the release method.

Mai traced the pattern. Her fingers moved across symbols that had been hidden beneath layers of guilt-memetic architecture. The blood had been cleaned from the glass. But she could still see where it had been.

"The release requires two things." Analytical. "A ritual separation. And a vessel for the Fragment to transition into."

"A vessel?"

"The Fragment has to go somewhere." Mai's pattern-tracing intensified. "Back to the space between. Or into a new container. The text describes both options."

"What kind of container?"

"A Silent Vessel." Analytical. "Someone designed to hold a Fragment. The release transfers the entity from one vessel to another. Or releases it entirely."

"And if it releases entirely..."

"The Fragment goes somewhere." Analytical. "The text doesn't specify. But it suggests the entity returns to its origin. The space between realities. The place it came from before the Scattering."

"And the host?"

"Survives or doesn't." Mai's hand tremored. "The text is clear about one thing. Release is not guaranteed survival. The host who releases their Fragment may die. May survive. May become something else."

"Something else?"

"Integrated." Analytical. "Like the thief. The Fragment and the host become one. But that takes centuries. If the release is forced, if it happens too fast, the host may not survive the transition."

---

Ace stood by the window. Shadow-pressure contracted around her.

Violet was stirring. The Fragment had been quiet during Mai's decoding. But now she pressed against Ace's consciousness. Responding to what they'd learned.

*The release. Violet's presence expanded. It's possible.*

*With a survival rate we don't know.*

*The thief survived. They showed you it was possible.*

*They were integrated. You and I are separate.*

*Yes. Violet's presence shifted. But the manuscript describes both options. Release to the space between. Or release to another vessel.*

*What would you choose?*

*I don't choose. Violet's presence contracted. I am the Fragment. I don't make choices. I am carried. I*

*am held. The host decides.*

*And if I release you?*

*You might survive. You might not. I might go somewhere else. Or I might cease to exist.*

*You don't know.*

*No. Quiet. I know that I don't want to be scattered anymore. I know that I want to stop running. But I don't know what happens after release. Neither does the manuscript.*

Ace's mechanical bird ticked in her pocket. The rhythm of survival.

*What do you want?*

*I want to stop being afraid. Violet's presence pressed against her mind. I want to stop being a fragment of something that was broken. I want to be whole.*

---

The fourth layer of the Codex was the hardest. It required Mai to navigate her own conscience. The guilt-memetic architecture showed her Tokyo again. The breach. The calculation she'd missed.

She worked through it in stages. Thirty minutes. Rest. Another thirty minutes.

Her nose bled through each session. The tremors came faster now. Visual static flickered at the edges of her vision. The taste of copper was constant.

But the pattern was emerging. The hidden text beneath the guilt-memetic layer. The truth the Vatican had buried.

"The Blood-Moon Event." Thin. "Wasn't random. Wasn't natural. The text describes it as a coordinated attempt."

Shammy's warmth sharpened. "Coordinated?"

"Multiple sites. Multiple villages. Multiple potential hosts." Mai traced the pattern. Her fingers shook. "The Vatican was testing Fragment binding at scale. The Blood-Moon Event was the largest trial. Hundreds of potential Silent Vessels. The ritual was designed to create as many hosts as possible. To see who survived. To see who was compatible."

"Ace's village..."

"Was one of many." Mai's voice cracked. Just slightly. "The text lists them. Fourteen locations. Fourteen trials. Most failed. The entities scattered. The hosts died. But some survived. Some held the Fragments."

"How many?"

"Three." Mai's hand tremored more violently. "Three hosts survived out of fourteen villages. The thief is one. Ace is another. The third. The text doesn't name them. But it notes they were the most successful vessel. The one who held the largest Fragment piece."

Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. "What happened to them?"

"The text doesn't say." Mai's nose was bleeding freely now. "The records end. The Vatican stopped the trials. Too many failures. The Blood-Moon Event was the last attempt. They sealed the knowledge. Hid the manuscripts."

"The thief has been destroying them."

"One by one." The analytical mask was cracking. "The Codex Umbra. The Silence Protocol. Now the Catalogue. They're erasing the knowledge of Fragment creation."

"Which means the release method..."

"Is in the Catalogue too." Mai's hand tremored. "The complete formula. The survival rates. The thief has the information. They survived because they had access to it."

---

Mai's nose was bleeding again. More this time.

Shammy caught her before she fell. The atmospheric pressure shifted. The air thickened around Mai. Supported her weight.

"Systemic burnout." Sharp. "You pushed too hard."

"The Codex..."

"Will be there after you rest." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "The manuscript isn't going anywhere."

"I was close." Thin. "The release formula. I could see..."

"You saw enough." Shammy's warmth settled. "You saw the location. You saw the history. You saw the method."

"Not all of it."

"Enough." Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. "You're bleeding. You're burning out. You're pushing past reserves you shouldn't touch."

Mai's hand tremored. The pattern-tracing had become automatic. Her fingers still moved across the table. Even now. Even exhausted.

"The calculation." Thin. "I can see the variables. The release rate. The integration factor. The survival probability."

"Rest." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "We leave for the monastery tomorrow. You'll need your strength."

---

Shammy sat with Mai in the safehouse. The Codex pages were stored. The hidden text decoded. The location marked.

"She's going to push herself to collapse." Shammy's warmth thinned. "The calculation is everything to her. If she can't solve it..."

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"She'll solve it." Stable. "But not tonight."

"Tokyo." Shammy's hair lifted. Atmospheric response to emotional weight. "The Codex showed her the pattern she missed. The equation that would have saved them."

"Yes."

"That's what she's carrying." Sharper. "The weight of knowing she could have done something. That she didn't see it in time."

"She sees it now." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "The Codex made her see it. Made her carry it."

"And the release calculation is the same pattern." Warm. But careful. "She's trying to solve it. To find the equation that saves you. Like she couldn't find the equation that saved Tokyo."

"Yes."

"What happens if she can't?"

The clockwork sparrow ticked. Wind and unwind. The familiar rhythm.

"Then we find another way." Settled. "The triad. Three vectors. One lock."

---

Mai rested. The burnout had depleted her. The systemic strain was visible. Trembling hands. Pale face. Blood still drying under her nose.

Shammy had cleaned her. Used a damp cloth to wipe the blood from Mai's face, her hands, the table where the Codex had been. The care was methodical. Warm. The kind of attention that said everything without words.

"Her systemic reserves are depleted." Soft. Directed at Ace, but not breaking the care. "She burned through her pattern-recognition capacity. The body needs to rebuild."

"How long?"

"A day. Maybe two. Depending on how hard she pushed." Shammy's stormfront kept the air regulated. Stable pressure. No fluctuation. "The nosebleed was the first warning. The tremors were the second. If she'd kept going, she would have collapsed completely. Systemic shutdown."

Mai's body was still now. The tremors had stopped. Her breathing was steady. But even in rest, her fingers moved. Tracing patterns on nothing.

"She's still calculating." Concern in the warmth. "Even unconscious. Her mind won't stop."

But her mind was still working. Even in rest. Even in exhaustion. She dreamed in patterns. Equations. Variables.

The release formula was incomplete. The Codex had revealed the structure. But not the specifics. The survival rate for separate hosts was unknown.

The thief had the information. The thief had survived. The thief knew the calculation.

And Mai would find it. She would solve the equation. She would calculate the survival probability. Because the alternative, watching Ace release without knowing the outcome, was unacceptable. The pattern was there. The equation existed. She just had to see it.

---

Shammy settled beside Mai. Her stormfront expanded slightly, creating a buffer of stable air. The atmospheric pressure in the room shifted. Warmer. Calmer. More regulated.

"She's still calculating." Soft. "Even unconscious. I can feel her mind working. The patterns."

Ace stood by the window. Shadow-pressure extended. Making the room feel smaller. More contained. Safer.

"The Codex showed her Tokyo." Flat. "The calculation she missed."

"The equation that would have saved her colleagues." Shammy's warmth carried weight. "She's carrying that. Now she's trying to solve the same equation for you."

"I know."

"What do you need?" Shammy's voice shifted. Atmospheric. Reading Ace's pressure. "Your shadow is different tonight. Violet is closer to the surface."

Ace's mechanical bird ticked. Slower now. More deliberate.

"Violet wants to stop running." Flat. "She wants to stop being a fragment."

"Release?"

"Maybe. The manuscript describes both options. Release to the space between. Or transfer to another vessel."

"What does Ace want?"

The question hung in the air. Shammy's atmospheric sense reached for the answer. But she waited. She didn't push.

"I don't know." Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. "Survival was always enough. Keep going. Keep serving. Keep being useful." The bird ticked. "Now there's more. The triad. You. Mai." Tick. "I don't know what I want yet."

"You'll figure it out." Shammy's warmth settled. "We'll be here."

---

The triad gathered around the Codex. The hidden text was fully decoded now. Mai's work had revealed the structure beneath the guilt-memetic architecture.

"The monastery." Stable. Rest had helped. "The Codex references a location. The Fragment

Catalogue Vol. VII was moved there. Fifty years ago.”

“The thief's next target.” Shammy's warmth sharpened.

“Yes.” Mai traced the pattern. Her hands were steadier now. “The Catalogue contains records of every Fragment. Every binding. Every Silent Vessel. The thief wants to destroy it. To prevent anyone from creating more hosts like Ace.”

“Or to prevent us from learning the release method.” Ace's shadow-pressure expanded.

“Both.” Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. “The Catalogue is a weapon. Like the Codex. Like the Silence Protocol. The Vatican created these manuscripts to control Fragments. To make vessels. To contain the hosts they created.”

“And the thief has been destroying them.”

“One by one.” Analytical. “The Codex Umbra. The Silence Protocol. Now the Catalogue. They're erasing the knowledge of Fragment creation.”

“Then we go to the monastery.” Ace's shadow-pressure settled. “We get the Catalogue before the thief destroys it. We learn what we can.”

“And the thief?”

“We ask them about release.” Ticking. “Without giving them my memories.”

---

Mai slept. The burnout had depleted her reserves. But the rest was helping.

Shammy sat watch. Her stormfront filled the room. Stable air. Regulated pressure. The atmospheric sense keeping Mai's systemic strain from getting worse.

Ace stood by the window. Shadow-pressure contracted. Watching. Waiting.

“What did the Codex show her?” Flat. “What did she see that made her push that hard?”

Shammy's atmospheric sense reached for Mai's resting form. Reading the patterns beneath the surface.

“Tokyo.” Weight in the warmth. “The pattern she missed. The equation that would have saved them.”

“The Codex showed her that?”

“It showed her what she could have done. The calculation she didn't make in time.” Shammy's hair lifted. “The guilt-memetic architecture. It's designed to exhaust the reader. But it also shows them what haunts them. What they're running from.”

“Tokyo.”

“Tokyo.” Warm. But careful. “She's been running from it since it happened. The calculation she didn't make. The colleagues she couldn't save.”

“And now she's trying to solve the same equation for me.”

“Yes.” Shammy's warmth settled. “She's trying to calculate your release. To find the equation that saves you. Like she couldn't find the equation that saved Tokyo.”

Ace's mechanical bird ticked. The rhythm of survival.

“What happens if she can't?”

“Then we find another way.” Shammy's stormfront expanded. “The triad. Three vectors. One lock. We don't leave anyone behind.”

---

The safehouse was quiet. The Codex was stored. The location was marked.

Tomorrow, the monastery. The Fragment Catalogue. The next piece of the puzzle.

Tonight, rest. The triad. Three vectors. Each carrying their own weight.

Mai: the pattern she'd missed. The calculation she was trying to solve again. The guilt-memetic architecture had shown her Tokyo, the equation that would have saved her colleagues. Now she carried both weights. The one she couldn't change. The one she might still solve.

Shammy: the choice she'd made. The storm she'd left behind. The warmth she brought to a team that needed it. Her atmospheric sense kept watch over Mai's resting form. Regulating pressure. Keeping the air stable. The care was as natural as breathing.

Ace: the Fragment she held. The release she might face. The knowledge that Violet had chosen her. Not randomly. Not accidentally. Deliberately. The village hadn't been random either. Fourteen trials. Fourteen attempts to create vessels.

She was one of three survivors.

Together, they would find the Catalogue. Together, they would learn the truth.

Together, they would face whatever came next.

Three vectors. One lock.

The triad.

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END OF CHAPTER EIGHT

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