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Chapter 19: The Catalogue Trail

The mechanical bird's wings unfurled.

Ace wasn't winding it anymore. She was just holding. Letting the tension release. The spring unwinding.

For the first time, she wasn't trying to control the rhythm. She was letting it be.

The bird's wings ticked against her palm. A countdown. Or a release. She couldn't tell which.

The Fragment Catalogue Vol. VII was still out there.

Not in the Vatican. Not in the monastery. Somewhere else. Moved. Hidden.

Mai traced the paper trail. Not digital. Ritual. The Catalogue was bound to its location. Couldn't be photographed. Only read in person.

"The ritual binding prevents reproduction." Mai's voice was analytical, her fingers moving across documents spread across the safehouse table. "Photographs blur. Copies self-destruct. The text exists in one place, in one form. Whoever wants to read it has to go to it."

"Convenient for keeping secrets." Shammy's warmth carried an edge. "Inconvenient for everyone else."

"The trail leads through acquisition records. Church archives. Private sales." Mai's pattern-tracing continued. "The Vatican sold it sixty years ago. Offloaded it to a private collector. They didn't want the responsibility anymore."

"They didn't want the liability." Ace's shadow-pressure pressed against the table's edge. "The Catalogue is dangerous. They knew."

"Dangerous to whom?" Shammy leaned against the wall, her storm-gradient hair catching the dim light. "The Fragments? The hosts? Or the institution that created them?"

"All of the above." Mai's hand trembled slightly. "The trail leads to a private collection. A collector of anomalous texts. Not Vatican. Not Foundation. Someone who operates outside both systems."

"A collector." Shammy's warmth thinned. "Someone who acquires. Who hides. Who keeps."

"Someone who doesn't want to be found." Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. Her fingers pressed against her palm, the rune-structures leaving faint marks. "The collector operates outside normal channels. They have the Catalogue. They might have other manuscripts. Other artifacts."

"Then we find them." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "We get the Catalogue. We learn what we can."

"The trail leads to an estate outside the city." Mai's hand trembled again. She pressed it flat against the table. "Anti-ritual architecture. Containment wards. The collector doesn't want visitors. The estate is designed to suppress."

"Suppress what?"

"Everything."

The estate was hidden in the hills outside Rome.

Walled. Protected. Iron gates old, but the wards were new. Mai could see the architecture of suppression woven into the stonework. Patterns designed to dampen. To reduce. To weaken.

"The wards are layered." Mai's voice had lost some of its precision. "Anti-ritual architecture. Anti-anomaly. Anti-ability."

"Anti-us." Shammy's warmth was thin. Her hair lay flat against her shoulders. No atmospheric lift. No storm-gradient. The air in this place was dead.

Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out.

The air didn't respond. The wind didn't listen. Her stormfront pressed against the estate's perimeter and found nothing to hold. No current. No pressure system. The environment was sterile.

"This place is designed to keep Fragment hosts out." Shammy's warmth had edges now. "The architecture is anti-anomaly. It suppresses abilities."

"It suppresses me." Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. Her fingers pressed against her palm, but the patterns weren't forming. "My calculation is affected. The wards are disrupting my systemic patterns. I can read the architecture, but I can't work with it."

"It suppresses me too." Shammy's hair stayed flat. "My stormfront is weak. The air isn't listening. There's nothing here. No weather. No flow. Just stillness."

"And me." Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. She felt it compress against her spine. The void-weight that made rooms feel smaller was being compressed itself. "The void is compressed. The architecture is designed to contain. To suppress."

"Then we're at a disadvantage." Shammy's warmth sharpened. She was compensating for the loss of her atmospheric sense by reading what she could see. "The collector knows what we are. They've prepared."

"Prepared for us specifically?" Mai's voice was tight. "Or prepared for anyone like us?"

"Does it matter?" Ace's shadow-pressure found its new baseline. Smaller. Tighter. But stable. "We need the Catalogue. We proceed. We adapt."

"Adapt." Shammy let out a breath. "With my stormfront at half capacity and Mai's systems degraded and your void compressed to the point where you can barely extend it past your own skin."

"Yes."

Shammy looked at Ace. At Mai. At the gates ahead. "I don't like this. The air here, it's not just still. It's hostile. Like the architecture is pushing back."

"Then we push forward." Ace's voice was flat. "Together."

The estate gates were iron. Old. Warded.

Mai traced the pattern with her fingers. The suppression made the work harder, her systemic patterns kept slipping. But the architecture itself was readable. She could see what it was designed to do.

"The wards are designed to suppress Fragment hosts." Mai's voice was analytical, but strain showed beneath. "But they're not designed to stop us entirely. They're designed to weaken. To reduce. To make us less than we are."

"Can you counter them?" Ace stood at the gate's edge, her shadow-pressure pressed against the iron.

"Not without burning out." Mai's hand trembled. "I'd need to override the suppression architecture. Push my systemic limits past safe thresholds. The nosebleed would be the least of it."

"Then we don't counter them." Flat. "We proceed weakened. We get the Catalogue. We learn what we can. We leave."

"And the collector?" Shammy's warmth thinned. "What do they want?"

"They have the Catalogue." Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. "They have other manuscripts. They're a collector. They might trade. They might share. They might be hostile."

"Then we find out."

Shammy looked at Mai. At Ace. At the gates that waited for them to enter. "I don't have my atmospheric sense. I can't read the environment. I can't feel what's coming. That's never happened before. I've always been able to feel the air."

Mai reached out. Her hand found Shammy's arm. "I can't promise my calculations will hold. The suppression is affecting my patterns. My equations keep slipping. I'm running at partial capacity."

Ace's shadow-pressure pressed against Shammy's other side. "You don't need to feel the air. I'll feel the pressure. Mai will read the patterns. You'll be the warmth."

"The warmth." Shammy's voice cracked. "That's all I'll have?"

"That's enough." Ace's voice was flat. But her shadow-pressure said something else. It said: I'm here. We're here. We proceed together.

Shammy took a breath. The air didn't respond.

But she did.

"Then we proceed."

The estate was a mansion. Old. Full of artifacts. Manuscripts. Anomalous objects.

The inside felt worse than the outside. The suppression architecture was concentrated here. Every wall, every floor, every ceiling was layered with patterns that reduced. Dampened. Weakened.

Mai walked with careful steps. Her systemic patterns kept trying to form and failing. The equations that normally ran in her mind were fragmentary. Incomplete. She could see the suppression architecture, but she couldn't work with it.

"It's worse inside." Analytical, but strained. "The wards are amplified. Multiple layers. Someone designed this specifically."

"Designed it for what?" Shabby walked close to Ace. Without her atmospheric sense, she couldn't read the space. Couldn't feel what was coming. She was blind in a way she'd never been blind before.

"For us." Ace's shadow-pressure pressed outward. Compressed. Tight. "For hosts. For anyone who carries a Fragment."

"Or for the collector themselves." Mai's hand trembled as she traced a pattern on the wall. "The architecture might suppress them too. Control them."

They moved through the mansion's halls. Artifacts lined the walls. Manuscripts in glass cases. Objects that pulsed with contained resonance. The collector had gathered more than manuscripts.

They had gathered containment. Suppression. Control.

The collector appeared at the top of the stairs.

A woman. Older. Silver hair that had once been dark. Eyes that had seen too much. She stood with the careful posture of someone managing pain.

"Fragment hosts." Careful. Measured. "A triad. Interesting."

"You have the Fragment Catalogue." Mai's voice was analytical despite the suppression. "We need access."

"I have many things." The collector descended the stairs. Her movements were precise, but Ace could see the tremor in her hands. "The Catalogue is one of them. Why do you need it?"

"The hunter is coming." Shabby's warmth was thin. "We need to understand Fragments. We need to learn the release method."

"Release." The collector's voice was heavy. "You want to know if you can survive release."

"Yes."

"The Catalogue doesn't have that data." The collector's eyes narrowed. "It has the creation rituals. The binding methods. The Silent Vessel architecture. But not the release rates. Not the survival probability."

"Then what does it have?"

"A map." Careful. "A map to every Fragment piece. Every scattered shard. Every location where a

Fragment is hidden.”

The collector revealed more than the Catalogue.

She led them to a sitting room. Old furniture. Older artifacts. A fire that burned without fuel. She sat with the careful posture of someone managing a body that was no longer fully theirs.

“You knew Elena.” Shammy's warmth was sharp. “You were partners.”

“We were hosts together.” The collector's voice was hollow. “Before I was consumed. Before I became this.”

“You didn't release.”

“I tried.” Heavy. “The release killed my host. But I survived. I took over. I became what remains.”

“You were consumed.” Mai's voice was analytical. But her hand trembled. Her systems were straining against the suppression.

“I was consumed. But I remember.” Hollow. “I remember being human. I remember Elena. I remember the partnership we had. I remember wanting to survive. Wanting to release. Wanting to be free.”

“What happened?”

“The release failed.” Heavy. “My host couldn't survive the transition. I was left without a vessel. So I became the vessel. I consumed what remained. I became this.”

The collector looked at Ace. At her shadow-pressure. At the compressed void that barely extended past her skin.

“You carry two now.” The collector's voice shifted. “Violet. And the burning one. I can feel them. Both of them.”

Ace didn't speak. But her shadow-pressure pressed outward. Acknowledging.

“Two Fragments in one vessel.” The collector's eyes were old. “That's dangerous. The vessel wasn't designed for two.”

“I know.” Flat.

“You know.” The collector leaned forward. “But you don't know what happens next. You don't know how long the vessel can hold. You don't know if the Fragments will fight. If they'll merge. If they'll consume you from the inside.”

“Then we need the Catalogue.” Mai's hand trembled. “We need to understand.”

“Understand what?” The collector's voice carried an edge. “The Catalogue won't tell you how to survive. It will tell you where the other pieces are. Every Fragment. Every host. Every hidden shard.”

“That's what we need.”

“Is it?” The collector stood. Her movements were precise, controlled. The suppression architecture kept her contained. Kept the entity inside her from fully emerging. “The Catalogue is a map. A map that shows every Fragment location. Do you know what happens if that map falls into the wrong hands?”

“Someone could find them.” Shammy's warmth thinned. “Find all of them.”

“Find all of them. Gather all of them. Reassemble all of them.” The collector's voice was hollow. “The Source was shattered for a reason. The Fragments were scattered for a reason. The Catalogue shows where they all are. Every location. Every host. Every hidden piece.”

Ace felt the echo.

Two Fragments inside her. Violet. The burning Fragment. Both responding to the consumed entity.

Violet pressed against her consciousness. Responding. Communicating.

You should have stayed scattered. Violet's presence expanded. *You should have stayed pieces. Not tried to reassemble.*

Or you should have reassembled. The consumed entity responded. The voice came from the collector's mouth, but the resonance was different. Older. Deeper. *We wouldn't be fighting alone.*

The hunter finds reassembled pieces. Violet's presence pressed. *We scattered to escape. We're still scattered. We're still running.*

And I consumed my host. The consumed entity's voice was hollow. *I tried to release. It failed. I survived. My host didn't.*

That's what we're trying to prevent. Violet's presence was quiet. *We're trying to survive. All of us. Host and Fragment.*

Then you need the Catalogue. The consumed entity's voice shifted. *But it's not just a book. It's a map. A map to every Fragment piece. And something is hunting them.*

The hunter.

Something else. Heavy. Something that wants the Fragments to reassemble. Something that's been tracking the pieces. The Catalogue shows where they all are. Every location. Every host. Every hidden shard.

The conversation between Fragments ended. Ace's consciousness returned to the foreground. The room materialized around her. The suppression architecture pressed against her shadow-pressure.

The consumed entity was still speaking through the collector's mouth.

“You're talking to Violet.” The collector's voice was hollow. “Right now. Inside you.”

“Yes.”

"And the burning one. You're holding both."

"Yes."

"That's why the hunter is coming for you." The collector's voice shifted. The entity was fully present now. "Two Fragments in one vessel. You're what it wants. What they all want. The ones who hunt. The ones who gather. The ones who want to reassemble."

"Who?"

"I don't know." Heavy. "I only know that the Catalogue is dangerous. Not because of what it contains. Because of what it reveals. Every Fragment location. Every hidden piece. If someone wanted to reassemble the Source, the Catalogue would show them how."

"Then we destroy it." Shammy's warmth sharpened. "Like Elena destroyed the other manuscripts."

"Or we use it." Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. Her voice was tight. "We find the pieces. We learn the locations. We understand the map."

"And risk something finding it?" The entity's voice was hollow. "The Catalogue has been hidden for a reason. It's dangerous. Not just to hosts. To everyone."

The consumed entity looked at Ace. Through the collector's eyes. Old eyes that had seen too much.

"You remind me of Elena." Heavy. "She carried her Fragment with grace. She never let it consume her. Even at the end."

"She released." Ace's voice was flat.

"She released." Hollow. "And I tried to follow. But my host couldn't survive. I was left without a vessel. So I became the vessel."

"Is that what happens to me?" Ace's shadow-pressure pressed outward. Compressed. Tight. "If I release?"

"I don't know." Heavy. "Every release is different. Every host is different. Every Fragment is different. I only know that I tried. And I failed. And I became what you see."

The consumed entity gave them the Catalogue's location.

Hidden. Warded. Protected. Deeper in the mansion. In a room designed to contain the uncontainable.

But the entity warned them.

"The Catalogue is a map." Hollow. "It shows where every Fragment is. If you use it, you can find the pieces. You can understand the distribution. But something else can use it too. Something that's been hunting the scattered parts."

"The hunter."

"The hunter feeds on Fragments. But something else wants them to reassemble. Something that's been pushing for reunion. Something that wants the Source to come back."

“What?”

“I don't know.” Heavy. “I only know that the Catalogue is dangerous. Not because of what it contains. Because of what it reveals. Every Fragment location. Every hidden piece. If someone wanted to reassemble the Source, the Catalogue would show them how.”

“Then we destroy it.” Shammy's warmth sharpened. “Like Elena destroyed the other manuscripts.”

“Or we use it.” Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. “We find the pieces. We learn the locations. We understand the map.”

“And if something else has it?” Hollow. “Then something else knows where every Fragment is. Where every host is. Where every hidden piece is waiting to be found.”

Mai's hand trembled. Her systems were straining. The suppression architecture was costing her. “We need to see it first. Understand what it contains. Then decide.”

“You don't understand.” The consumed entity's voice carried weight. “The Catalogue doesn't just show locations. It shows bindings. Rituals. Methods for creating Silent Vessels. Methods for transferring Fragments between hosts. Everything the Vatican learned about Fragment containment. Everything they experimented with. Everything they buried.”

“Then we need to destroy it.” Shammy's warmth sharpened. “If it shows how to create more hosts. How to transfer Fragments. That's dangerous.”

“Or we need to control it.” Mai's voice was tight. “If it shows how to transfer Fragments. That might be how we survive release. How we help Ace.”

“Both can't happen.” The consumed entity's voice was hollow. “You can't destroy it and use it. You can't control it and keep it from others. The Catalogue is power. Power over every Fragment. Power over every host. Power over the Source itself.”

The triad stood in the collector's estate. The consumed entity before them. The Catalogue's location revealed.

“What do we do?” Shammy's warmth was thin. The suppression architecture was wearing on her. On all of them.

“We get the Catalogue.” Ace's shadow-pressure settled. Finding its new baseline. Compressed but stable. “We learn what we can. We decide whether to destroy it.”

“Or use it.” Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. Her hand trembled. “The map to every Fragment. Every location. Every host. If we understand the map, we understand the hunter. We understand what's tracking us.”

“And if something else wants the map?” Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out. Found nothing. The air was still. Hostile. “The entity said something is pushing for reunion. Something that wants the Source to come back.”

“Then we need to know what.” Ace's mechanical bird was ticking. Its wings unfurled in her palm. “We need to understand the threat. The Catalogue shows the locations. We use it to understand what's

hunting us.”

“Or we destroy it.” Shammy's warmth sharpened. “Like Elena destroyed the others. Prevent anyone from using it.”

“We decide after we see it.” Mai's hand trembled. “We get the Catalogue. We learn what it contains. We decide together.”

The consumed entity watched them. Through the collector's eyes. Eyes that had seen too much.

“You're deciding together.” Hollow. “That's good. That's more than I had. More than Elena had at the end. She decided alone. She destroyed the manuscripts alone. She released alone.”

“She had partners.” Ace's shadow-pressure pressed outward. “She had you.”

“And I tried to follow.” Heavy. “But my release failed. And I became this. A Fragment wearing a human shape. A vessel that consumed itself.”

“Is that what I'll become?” Ace's voice was flat. But her shadow-pressure said something else. It said: I'm afraid. I'm holding two. I don't know what happens next.

“I don't know.” The entity's voice was honest. “No one knows. The release is different for everyone. The survival is different for everyone. All I know is what happened to me. And what happened to Elena.”

“What happened to Elena?”

“She released.” Hollow. “And she survived. That's all I know. The rest is between her and her Fragment.”

The consumed entity led them to the Catalogue.

Hidden. Warded. Protected. The room was deeper in the mansion. The suppression architecture was thickest here. Every wall, every floor, every ceiling was designed to contain. To reduce. To weaken.

The manuscript was old. Bound. Text that moved when you weren't looking. Words that rearranged themselves. A book that wasn't just a book.

“This is the Fragment Catalogue Vol. VII.” The entity's voice was hollow. “Every Fragment location. Every hidden piece. Every host that carries a shard.”

“Does it show the release method?” Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. Her systems were straining against the suppression. She couldn't read the patterns clearly.

“No.” Heavy. “Only the locations. The binding rituals. The creation methods. Not the release. That data was lost.”

“Then why is it valuable?”

“Because it's a map.” Hollow. “To every piece of the Source. If you wanted to reassemble, this would show you how.”

“And if someone else has it?”

“Then someone else knows where every Fragment is. Where every host is. Where every hidden piece is waiting to be found.”

Mai reached for the Catalogue. Her hand trembled. The suppression architecture fought her. But she touched the binding. Felt the weight of it.

“This is it.” Mai's voice was tight. “Every Fragment location. Every binding ritual. Every method for creating Silent Vessels.”

“Everything the Vatican buried.” The entity's voice was hollow. “Everything they experimented with. Everything they wanted to forget.”

The triad stood before the Catalogue. The manuscript. The map. The danger.

“What do we do?” Shammy's warmth was thin. The suppression architecture was wearing on all of them.

“We learn what we can.” Ace's shadow-pressure settled. “We understand the threat. We decide together.”

“And the hunter?”

“The hunter is coming.” Mai's hand trembled against the Catalogue's binding. “The Catalogue might help us understand. Or it might make things worse.”

“Then we decide together.” Shammy's warmth returned. Finding itself despite the suppression. “Three vectors. One lock. The triad.”

“Together.”

The consumed entity watched them. Through the collector's eyes. Eyes that had seen too much.

“Good luck.” The entity's voice was hollow. “You'll need it. The Catalogue shows the way to every Fragment. But it also shows the way for every Fragment to be found. Use it wisely. Or destroy it quickly. But don't let it fall into hands that would reassemble what was scattered for good reason.”

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