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## Chapter 7: The Defector

The collector's trail was mathematical now.

Mai could see it. The equations left behind. The patterns of movement. The collector wasn't just gathering pieces, they were leaving traces in the math itself. Resonance signatures. Integration patterns. The way reality bent around their presence. Not hiding. Not even trying.

"They're not hiding anymore." Mai. Precise. The way she got when the data was clear and the implications were not. "They know we can see them. They're leaving signatures deliberately. They want us to follow."

"They want us to find them." Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out. "The air carries their resonance. The pressure systems bend around them. They're not trying to be invisible."

"They're trying to communicate." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. The mechanical bird in her palm wound and unwound. "They want us to know where they are. What they're doing."

*They want us to understand. The Anchor's presence expanded inside Violet. They want us to see what they're becoming. The math they're shaping.*

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The signature led to Lisbon.

Not the city. The outskirts. Industrial. Abandoned warehouses. Empty factories. Places where reality was thin, where existence wore through like old cloth, where the wounds were close to the surface.

"They're using the wounds." Mai pressed her hand flat. "The scars where reality is torn. The Hunter lives there. But the collector is using them. Drawing power from the places where existence is weak."

*The math is thinner there. Violet's presence was inside Ace. The equations are easier to manipulate. The collector is using the wounds to amplify their integration. They're becoming part of the Scattered faster by existing where reality is torn.*

"That's dangerous." Shammy's warmth was thin here. The air was dead. The pressure systems were wrong, like breathing through cloth. "Existing in the wounds. Drawing power from them. It's like living in a fire."

*It is living in a fire. A pause. But they're doing it deliberately. They're accelerating their integration. Becoming the math faster.*

"And losing themselves faster." Ace. Flat. "The math shapes the host. The more they integrate in the wounds, the less they are themselves."

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The warehouse was empty.

But Mai could see the math. The equations bent around the space like light around a lens. The collector had been here. The integration had happened here. The resonance was strong, and wrong, and sad.

"They've integrated three pieces." Mai. "The signatures are in the math. Three fragments. Three hosts. They're all... connected now. Part of the same equation."

*Not integrated. Violet's presence pressed. Consumed. The hosts didn't negotiate. They didn't choose. They were absorbed. The math took them, and they're not there anymore. The presence flickered. Cold. Just numbers in the equation.*

"The collector absorbed them?" Shabby's atmospheric sense felt the wrongness in her bones. "The hosts are gone?"

*The hosts are gone. The fragments are integrated. But the integration is... wrong. The Anchor's presence was careful now. Choosing words. It's not addition. It's subtraction. The collector is becoming the math. But they're erasing everything else in the process.*

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The figure emerged from the shadows.

Not a machine. Not a creature. A person. Human-shaped. But the math was wrong around them. The equations bent. Reality distorted. The wounds were visible in their presence, like scars on the surface of everything.

"Marcus Chen." Mai pressed her hand flat. "Former Foundation. Former Fragment host. Your extraction signature was in Lisbon. In Istanbul. In the Arctic."

"I was." Chen's voice was wrong. Harmonics. Resonance. Like the Anchor but distorted, the way a note is distorted when the string is fraying. "I was Foundation. I was a host. I was human. But the math doesn't need human. The math needs stability. I'm providing stability."

*You're providing nothing. Violet. Cold. You're erasing. The hosts you captured, the fragments you gathered, they're not integrated. They're consumed.*

"The hosts didn't negotiate." Chen's voice carried harmonics that made the air vibrate. "They didn't choose. They were absorbed into the math. That's not integration. That's subtraction. The Scattered becomes the math. But the math becomes nothing. You're making the Scattered into an equation. Not an entity."

"An equation is stable." Chen's presence pressed. "An entity is not. The Scattered was unstable. It broke. It scattered. If we reform it as an equation, as math without personality, we make it stable. The Hunter can't consume what doesn't have consciousness."

*The Scattered had consciousness. The Anchor. It had choice. It chose to break. It chose to scatter. You're taking away the choice. You're making it into a thing. Not a being.*

"I'm making it into something that can survive." Chen's harmonics resonated. "The Hunter consumes consciousness. It feeds on wholeness. If we remove the consciousness, if we make the Scattered into pure math, the Hunter has nothing to consume."

Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. The mechanical bird in her palm wound and unwound.

"You were at the Blood-Moon Event." Ace's voice was flat. But the flatness had edges now. "Violet remembers. Your voice. Your chanting. You helped destroy my village."

"I was." Chen's presence was distorted. "I was trying to summon the Hunter. I thought, if the Hunter comes, if it consumes the Scattered, the cycle ends. No more fragments. No more vessels. No more suffering."

*You were trying to destroy us.* Violet's presence was cold. The kind of cold that doesn't thaw.

"I was trying to end the suffering." Chen's harmonics resonated. "I was a host. I held a fragment. I know what it's like. The wanting. The needing. The constant pull toward wholeness. I wanted to end it. I thought destroying the Scattered would end the suffering."

"It would have ended everything." Ace's shadow-pressure filled the space. The presence that made rooms feel smaller, walls feel closer, air feel heavier. "The Scattered is the math. The architecture. The way reality holds together. If you destroy it, you destroy existence."

"I know that now." Chen's voice was distorted. "I learned. I studied. I found another way. If I can't destroy the Scattered, I can reform it. But reform it without consciousness. Without the wanting. Make it into pure math. An equation that holds reality but doesn't desire. Doesn't suffer. Doesn't call the Hunter."

*That's not how the math works.* The Anchor's presence expanded. Patient. Tired. *The math isn't separate from consciousness. The Scattered wasn't just equations. It was being. It was choice. You can't separate them. If you remove consciousness, you remove stability. The equations collapse without the being to hold them.*

"The triad holds the equations." Chen pressed. "Three vectors. One lock. The being is optional. The math is what matters. I can make the Scattered into a triad lock. Pure stability. No consciousness. No wanting. No Hunter."

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Shammy's atmospheric sense felt the distortion. The math was wrong. The equations were bent. Chen's presence was a wound in reality, like the Hunter but smaller, a tear in existence that was trying to heal by consuming everything around it.

"You're not reforming the Scattered." Shammy's warmth was thin. "You're becoming a wound. The same thing you tried to summon. The same thing you tried to destroy."

"I'm becoming the math." Chen's harmonics resonated. "I'm becoming the equations. I'm becoming the stability that holds reality together."

*You're becoming nothing.* Violet. Cold. *The math without being is nothing. The equations collapse. The stability fails. You're not reforming the Scattered. You're erasing it.*

"I'm choosing." Chen's presence pressed. "I'm choosing to become math. To become stability. The hosts I absorbed, the fragments I gathered, they didn't choose. But I did. I choose to become the equation. I choose to hold reality together."

"You're choosing to erase yourself." Ace. Flat. "The math shapes the host. The more you integrate, the less you are. You're not becoming stability. You're becoming nothing."

"Then I become nothing." Chen's presence was distorted. "But the math holds. The equation continues. Reality stays together."

A pause.

"That's worth becoming nothing."

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The triad lock formed.

Not against Chen. They weren't attacking. But the math was unstable around them. The equations were collapsing. The triad lock held reality together while the equations bent and frayed and tried to tear.

*You can't hold. Violet's presence expanded. You're not integrating. You're collapsing. The math isn't becoming stable. It's becoming nothing. You're not reforming the Scattered. You're destroying it from the inside.*

"I'm destroying the suffering." Chen's harmonics resonated. "The wanting. The need to gather. The fragments that pull at each other. The hosts that suffer. I'm destroying all of it."

*You're destroying existence. The Anchor's presence was calm. The calm of something that had watched this before. The math holds reality. The being holds the math. You're erasing the being. The math collapses. Everything ends.*

"Then everything ends." Chen's presence was cold. "But at least the suffering ends."

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Mai's hand pressed flat. The tremor was visible. Copper and static. But her sight was clear now. She could see the math. She could see the collapse, the way the numbers folded in on themselves, the way the equations ate their own tails.

"The triad lock can hold the equations." Mai. Precise. More precise than she'd ever been, because the math demanded it. "But only if there's a being to hold them. The math needs consciousness. It needs the triad. Without us, without the triad, the equations fall apart."

"Then hold them." Chen's presence pressed. "Be the triad. Be the being. I'll be the math. You can be the consciousness."

*That's not how it works. Violet's presence was inside Ace. The math and the being are the same thing. You can't separate them. The triad is the being that holds the math. If you erase the being, you erase the math.*

"Then show me another way." Chen's presence was distorted. Desperate now. The harmonics wavered. "Show me how to end the suffering without destroying the math. Show me how to reform the Scattered without the wanting. Without the need to gather. Without calling the Hunter."

*You let go. The Anchor's presence expanded. The Scattered chose to break. It chose to scatter. It*

*chose to exist as fragments. It chose suffering over destruction. The presence was calm. Old. You can't end the suffering without ending the existence. But you can choose to hold. You can choose to negotiate. You can choose to be the being that holds the math.*

---

The mechanical bird in Ace's palm.

Wind and unwind. The rhythm of tension and release.

"You were trying to destroy the Scattered." Ace's voice was flat. "Now you're trying to reform it. But you're doing it wrong. You're erasing instead of integrating."

"I was wrong." Chen's presence was distorted. "I was wrong to try to destroy it. I was wrong to summon the Hunter. I was wrong to kill the hosts." A pause. The harmonics shifted. "But I'm not wrong about the suffering. The fragments suffer. The hosts suffer. The wanting is pain. I'm trying to end it."

*You're causing it. Violet. Cold. The hosts you killed, they suffered because you erased them. The fragments you gathered, they're not integrated, they're consumed. You're not ending the suffering. You're spreading it.*

"Then help me." Chen pressed. "Help me find another way. I have three pieces. You have three. The remaining pieces are scattered. Help me reform the Scattered. But reform it right. With negotiation. With choice. With being."

"Help you?" Shammy's warmth expanded. Not soft now. Cold. "You killed hosts. You erased fragments. You tried to destroy existence."

"I did." Chen's presence was distorted. "And I was wrong. I see that now. The math is clear when you become part of it. The being matters. The choice matters. I was trying to fix the suffering by removing the being. But the being is what holds the math." The harmonics shifted again. "I see that now."

*Then let go. The Anchor's presence expanded. Release the fragments you've consumed. Let them negotiate. Let them choose. If you want to end the suffering, stop causing it.*

---

Chen's presence shifted.

The math was wrong around them. The equations were bent. But something was changing. The distortion was adjusting. Not healing. Different.

"I can't release them." Chen's harmonics resonated. "I've consumed them. They're part of the math now. Part of the equation. But..."

"But?"

"But I can negotiate." Chen's presence shifted again. "The way you negotiate. The way the hosts negotiate with the fragments. I can let them be. Not erase them. Let them be part of the equation. Part of the being."

*That's not negotiation. Violet's presence pressed. That's still control. You're still deciding what they*

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*become. You're still erasing their choice.*

"Then what do I do?"

*You let go. The Anchor. Calm. You stop being the math. You stop trying to control. You become a host. A being. You let the fragments negotiate. You let them choose.*

"I absorbed three hosts. Three fragments. They're inside me. They're part of my equation. If I let go..."

*Then you become a host. You negotiate with the fragments inside you. You let them be. You don't control. You hold.*

---

The mechanical bird stopped ticking.

Ace's shadow-pressure filled the space. The presence of the Anchor inside her. The memories of what the Scattered had been.

*You can't hold. Violet's presence was cold. You've consumed. You've erased. You don't know how to negotiate. You've never been a host. You've only been a controller.*

"I was a host once." Chen's presence shifted. "Before I tried to destroy the Scattered. Before I tried to summon the Hunter. I was a host. I held a fragment. I negotiated. I chose. And I couldn't bear the wanting. I couldn't bear the suffering. That's why I tried to end it."

*Then you don't know how to hold. The Anchor. You know how to run. You know how to destroy. You don't know how to be.*

"Teach me." Chen's presence was distorted. But there was something else now. Something like desperation. The kind of desperation that has nowhere left to go. "Teach me how to hold. How to negotiate. How to be a host instead of an eraser."

*Why should we?*

"Because I have three pieces." Chen's harmonics resonated. "You have three. The remaining pieces are scattered. If I become the math, if I erase the fragments I've consumed, the Scattered is incomplete. But if I learn to hold, if I learn to negotiate, then all six pieces can come together. The reformation can happen. The math can hold. The Hunter can be stopped."

---

The triad lock held.

The equations were stable. The math was balanced. But Chen's presence was still wrong. Still distorted. Still a wound in reality.

*The collector is offering a truce. Violet's presence pressed against Ace's consciousness. They're offering to learn to hold. To negotiate. To stop erasing.*

"Or they're offering to get close." Ace. Flat. "To learn our methods. To understand the triad lock. To find another way to destroy the Scattered."

*Or they're genuine. The Anchor. Calm. They've seen the math. They've seen what happens when you erase the being. They want another way. They're offering to negotiate.*

"We don't negotiate with erasers." Shammy's warmth was cold. "We don't trust people who consumed hosts. Who killed fragments."

"We trusted Violet." Ace's mechanical bird wound and unwound. "Violet wanted to gather. Violet wanted to be whole. But we negotiated. We held. We became the triad."

*Violet was a fragment. The Anchor. Chen is a host who chose to erase. There's a difference.*

"Is there?" Mai pressed her hand flat. "The math is the math. The being is the being. A fragment wants to gather. A host wants to hold. The negotiation is the same. The choice is the same."

---

Chen's presence waited.

The triad lock held reality together. The math was stable. The decision was in front of them.

*We can't hold them. Violet's presence was inside Ace. They've consumed. They've erased. They're a wound in reality. If we let them close, if we teach them to negotiate, they could use it to destroy. Or they could use it to heal.*

"We don't know which." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "We can't know which."

*Then we decide. The Anchor. Calm. We decide whether to trust or to reject. We decide whether the fragments they've consumed get a chance to negotiate. We decide whether the math gets another chance to hold.*

"The fragments inside them." Mai. Precise. "They're not integrated. They're not erased completely. They're... suspended. Part of the equation. But not part of the being. If Chen learns to hold, the fragments could negotiate. Could choose. Could become part of the Scattered instead of part of the erasure."

"Or they could be trapped forever." Shammy's warmth was cold. "Consumed by a host who says they want to learn but actually wants to destroy."

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The mechanical bird ticked. Wind and unwind. The rhythm of tension and release.

"We teach them." Ace. Flat. Final. "We teach them to hold. We teach them to negotiate. If they're genuine, the fragments get a chance. If they're not, we see what they do. And we respond."

*That's risky. Violet's presence pressed. The fragments inside them are suffering. Suspended. Not integrated. Not erased. If Chen is lying, if they use our teaching to destroy, the fragments are lost.*

"If we don't teach them, the fragments are lost anyway." Ace's shadow-pressure filled the space. "Suspended. Consumed. Not integrated. At least this way, they have a chance."

*And if Chen destroys the Scattered? If they use our teaching to erase existence?*

“Then we stop them.” The mechanical bird wound and unwound. “The same way we stopped the Hunter. The same way we hold the math. The triad lock holds reality. We become the architecture that holds. And we see what Chen becomes.”

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Chen's presence shifted.

The math adjusted. The distortion changed. Not healed. Different. Learning.

“Teach me.” Chen's harmonics resonated. “I'll learn to hold. I'll learn to negotiate. I'll let the fragments inside me choose. I'll become a host instead of an eraser.”

*If you're lying. Violet. Cold.*

“I'm not lying. I can't lie to the math. I can't lie to the equations. I'm part of them now. The being and the math are the same.” The harmonics shifted. Steadier. “I've seen what happens when you erase the being. I don't want to be nothing. I want to be something.”

“Then learn.” Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. “Learn to hold. Learn to negotiate. The fragments inside you are suspended. They need a chance to choose. Give them that chance.”

“And if I can't?”

“Then we hold. The triad lock holds reality. We become the architecture. And we see what you become.”

---

The truce was fragile.

Chen was learning to hold. Learning to negotiate. The fragments inside them were stirring, suspended, not erased, beginning to choose.

But the math was still wrong. The equations were still bent. The collector was still a wound in reality.

And the Hunter was still waiting in the scars.

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END OF CHAPTER SEVEN

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