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Chapter 7: Codex Umbra

The Codex pages turned themselves.

Not mechanically. There was no mechanism. No motor. No visible cause. The pages simply moved. Each leaf lifted, turned, settled. The motion was wrong. Not the wrongness of a machine operating, but the wrongness of something that shouldn't move at all. As if the book itself was alive. As if it had intention.

Mai watched the ink crawl across old paper. Letters that moved like insects, shapes that pressed meaning into her mind without passing through language first. The manuscript had been a warning. The thief had given them a weapon. But Mai was starting to understand that the Codex Umbra was also a mirror.

Showed you what haunted you. Showed you the question underneath the wound.

Did you choose wrong?

She traced the pattern on her disruptor pistol. The same three circles. Interlocking. The shape she drew when her mind was working through something her hands hadn't finished yet.

The Tokyo breach. The calculation she'd missed. The pattern that had always been there.

The Codex had shown her. Made her see it. Made her carry the weight of knowing that she could have saved them. That the equation had existed. That she'd missed it.

In the vision, the numbers had been clear. She could see them now. Arranged in the air like a circuit diagram, each variable connected to the next. The breach point. The containment threshold. The exact frequency that would have stabilized the anomaly before it consumed the building.

She'd calculated the threshold wrong. Not by much. By seconds.

But seconds were everything when you were watching your colleagues burn.

The Codex showed her the faces. Tanaka. Reyes. Okafor. They'd trusted her equations. They'd moved where she said to move, positioned where she told them to position. And the breach had swallowed them anyway.

The equation existed. You didn't find it.

That was the question underneath. Not whether she'd failed. She knew she'd failed. But whether she'd chosen to fail. Whether some part of her had wanted the numbers to be wrong. Whether she'd been tired, or distracted, or just not good enough.

Mai's hand trembled. Just slightly. Just enough that she felt it.

The Codex pressed deeper. Showed her the pattern she'd missed. Three years of data points that led to the breach, if she'd only connected them. She'd had the information. She'd had the ability.

She'd just... hadn't.

Did you choose wrong?

Not whether she'd made a mistake. Whether she'd chosen to make it.

Shammy found her in the reading room. The Codex pages spread across the table. Mai's fingers still tracing patterns on surfaces that didn't need tracing.

"You're doing it again." Warm. But careful.

"Doing what?"

"The tracing thing. Where your hands solve problems your brain hasn't finished with yet."

Mai looked down. Her fingers had stopped moving. She hadn't noticed. "The hidden text is layered. There's information about Fragment containment beneath the guilt-memetic. But the manuscript is designed to show the reader's doubt first."

"Designed by who?"

"The Vatican." Analytical. "Or whoever they were trying to contain. The Codex Umbra was a containment tool. A way to show Fragment hosts what they feared most. A way to break them."

Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out. The room was sterile. Climate-controlled. Harder for her to read. But she felt Mai's pressure. The weight she was carrying.

"You saw something." Warm. "In the pages."

"The Tokyo breach." Mai's pattern-tracing resumed. "The equation I missed. The pattern that would have saved them."

"And you're solving it now?"

"I'm seeing it now." Thin. "The Codex forces you to see what you've been avoiding. The question underneath the wound."

"What question?"

Mai's hand trembled. Just slightly. "Whether I chose wrong. Whether I'm the reason they died."

Shammy's hair lifted. Atmospheric response to emotional weight. "The Codex shows doubt. Not truth."

"It shows the question." Analytical. But thin. "Whether the answer matters. It depends on what you do with it."

Ace sat with the Codex page in her hands. The text had stopped moving. But she could feel Violet inside her. Stirring. Responding to what the manuscript had shown.

You saw it. Violet's presence pressed into her consciousness. Not words. Pressure. The village. The fire. The binding.

I saw it.

And?

I still don't remember what happened after. Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. You're holding the rest. The part I can't see.

The part you chose not to see.

Did I choose?

Violet didn't answer in words. Just pressure. A sense. The Fragment had been bound to her in the aftermath of the Blood-Moon. But the memories of the binding, the ritual, the choosing... Violet held them. Not Ace.

The Codex had shown her the village. The fire that consumed everything. The faces of people she'd known. Older sister, younger brother, the woman who made bread on Tuesdays, the man who fixed roofs. All of them burning.

And herself. Standing in the center.

Unburned.

Why me? The question the Codex pressed into her. *Why did you survive when they didn't?*

The vision had shown her the binding from outside. Like watching someone else's memory. A child, herself but not herself, standing in fire that didn't touch her. Shadow-pressure radiating outward. The faces of the dead turning toward her, asking the question that the Codex wanted her to ask.

Did you choose wrong?

Not whether she'd survived. Whether she'd chosen to survive. Whether some part of her had made a deal with the fire. Had traded her village for her life.

Ace's mechanical bird ticked in her pocket. Wound. Unwound. The rhythm of tension and release.

If I give the thief those memories, what happens to them?

They become someone else's. Violet's presence shifted. The thief wants to understand how we bound. How we survived. But those memories are yours. Not mine to give.

And if I want them back?

You'd have to carry them. The Fragment's presence expanded. The fire. The faces. The choosing. You'd have to hold all of it.

The tiny mechanism kept its steady rhythm. Wind and unwind.

I've been holding things my whole life, she thought. One more set of memories won't break me.

That's not the question. Violet's presence contracted. The question is: what happens after you remember?

The triad gathered in the safehouse. The Codex pages spread across the table. The hidden text visible now. Mai's work with the layered structure had revealed what the manuscript actually contained.

"Fragment containment." Analytical. "The text describes how Fragments are made. How they bind to hosts. And how they can be released."

"Released?" Shammy's warmth sharpened. "You mean..."

"Liberated." Mai's pattern-tracing intensified. "The manuscript describes a process. A way for Fragment hosts to release the entity without dying."

Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "The thief survived their release."

"They survived because they were already integrated." Analytical. "Four hundred years of binding. The Fragment and the host became one entity. When they released..."

"They released something that was already them." Warm. But careful. "Not something separate."

"Yes." Mai's voice was analytical. "But the manuscript suggests another possibility. A release that doesn't require integration. A way for hosts who are still separate from their Fragments to survive."

Ace's mechanical bird was ticking. Faster now.

"Does it work?"

"The text doesn't say." Mai's pattern stopped. "It describes the method. But not the outcome. Not the survival rate."

"How many hosts survive release?"

"Unknown." Analytical. "The thief survived. But they were integrated. For separate hosts. Hosts like you. The manuscript doesn't provide data."

Shammy took the Codex next. The pages turned themselves, letters crawling, reforming. The ink knew who was reading. It knew what to show.

The storm.

Not her storm. The one she'd been before she'd chosen to be a person. The Codex showed her the atmosphere from inside. Pressure systems that moved across continents. Wind that carried rain, snow, the memories of places it had touched. A consciousness without edges. A self that was also everything.

What if you'd stayed?

The vision showed her what she might have been. A hurricane that made landfall and didn't stop. A blizzard that buried cities. A pressure system that could have circled the globe forever, unchanging, unchangeable.

Did you choose wrong?

The question pressed into her. Not whether she regretted becoming human. She didn't. But whether she'd had the right to choose at all. Whether a storm could decide to be something else. Whether becoming a person was a choice or a theft.

The Codex showed her the triad. Ace's shadow-pressure, Mai's equations, Shammy's own stormfront wrapping around them both. The warmth she felt when they were together. The belonging.

And then it showed her what the storm would have been. Alone. Vast. Powerful. Unfeeling.

Which is real? the Codex asked. The storm you were or the person you became?

Shammy's hair lifted. The sterile air of the safehouse pressed against her. She couldn't feel the wind in here. Couldn't read the pressure. The Codex had taken her doubt and made it solid.

Did you choose wrong?

The question wasn't about regret. It was about identity. Whether she was pretending to be something she wasn't. Whether the person she'd become was real or just weather wearing a human shape.

The Codex showed each of them their doubt.

Ace: The village. The fire. The choosing. Why her? Why had Violet chosen her? What made her the vessel?

Mai: The Tokyo breach. The calculation she'd missed. The pattern that was always there.

Shammy: The storm. The choice to become human. The doubt underneath. Had she chosen wrong?

They sat with the weight of it. The questions the manuscript had forced them to carry.

"The Codex doesn't show fear." Warm. But thin. "It shows doubt. The question underneath the wound."

"Did you choose wrong?" Flat.

"I don't know." Shammy's hair lifted. Atmospheric response to emotional weight. "Maybe the storm was easier. Maybe being weather didn't hurt."

"But?"

"But I wouldn't have you." Her warmth returned. "Or Mai. Or the triad."

Mai's voice was analytical. "The question for me is different. I know I chose wrong. I know I missed the pattern. The Codex made me see it. Made me carry it."

"What do you do with it?" Shammy asked.

"Calculate differently." Mai's pattern-tracing resumed. "Use the data. The pattern I missed in Tokyo. The next time I see something similar, I'll recognize it. The Codex gave me the equation. I can solve it now."

"And the emotional weight?" Flat.

Mai's hand trembled. Just slightly. "That's the part I can't calculate."

The hidden layer of the Codex contained more than containment methods.

Mai traced the text. Her fingers moved across patterns that had been invisible before. The manuscript was written in a code that responded to the reader's guilt. Once you saw your doubt, you could see past it. The real text emerged.

"There's a history here." Analytical. "Fragment entities were created as containment vessels. For something older."

"Older than Fragments?" Shabby's warmth sharpened.

"Something that existed before. Something that needed to be contained." Mai's pattern-tracing intensified. "The text calls it the Scattering. An entity that was broken apart. Shattered into pieces. Each piece became a Fragment."

"And the hosts?" Ace's shadow-pressure contracted.

"The hosts are the new vessels." Analytical. "The Fragment binds to a human. Uses them as a container. But the process was supposed to be temporary. The Fragment was supposed to move on. Release."

"What happened?"

"The Blood-Moon Event." Analytical. "Someone tried to reassemble the scattered pieces. All at once. The ritual was interrupted. But it bound the Fragments to their hosts permanently. Made them Silent Vessels."

The clockwork sparrow ticked steadily. The rhythm of holding on.

"Violet was one of the scattered pieces." Flat. "She bound to me during the Blood-Moon. Because the ritual interrupted the release process."

"Yes." Analytical. "But there's more. The text suggests that the Scattering was intentional. Someone broke the original entity apart. To prevent something worse."

"Prevent what?"

"The text doesn't say." Mai's pattern stopped. "But the implication is clear. The original entity was dangerous. Breaking it apart was the only way to contain it."

The pages revealed more. Mai traced the hidden text with careful fingers. The guilt-memetic had

peeled away, leaving something older underneath.

"The Codex was written by a Fragment host." Analytical. "Someone who survived release. They documented the process. The real process, not the Vatican's version."

"Survived?" Shammy's warmth sharpened. "You mean..."

"Integrated. The text describes integration as a choice. Not something that happens to you, but something you choose. The Fragment and the host become one entity. When release comes, the entity that emerges is both and neither."

Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "Violet and I aren't integrated."

"No." Analytical. "The text is clear. Integration takes time. Centuries, sometimes. The thief survived because they'd been bound for four hundred years. The Fragment was already part of them."

"And separate hosts?"

"The manuscript describes separation." Mai's pattern-tracing intensified. "A ritual. The Fragment goes somewhere. Back to the space between, the text says. The host remains. But the survival rate is unknown. The text doesn't give numbers."

"Someone didn't want us to know." Shammy's hair lifted. "The Vatican. Or whoever wrote this."

"The Vatican used the Codex as a containment tool." Analytical. "They didn't want Fragment hosts to release. They wanted to break them. Make them doubt. Make them compliant."

"The hidden text is a message." Flat. "Buried under the guilt. Written for someone who could see past it."

Mai's hand trembled. Just slightly. "The thief left us a weapon. But they left us a warning too. Release is possible. But survival isn't guaranteed."

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

Violet was stirring. The Fragment had been quiet since the Codex reading. But now she was pressing against Ace's consciousness. Responding to what they'd learned.

I was part of something larger. Violet's presence expanded. Before the Scattering. Before the hosts. I was one piece of a whole.

And you want to be whole again.

I want to stop being scattered. Violet's presence shifted. I want to stop being afraid. I want to stop being a fragment of something that was broken.

What happens if you reassemble?

I don't know. Violet's presence contracted. The text doesn't say. But the hunter. The thing that feeds on Fragment resonance. It's what the original entity was trying to escape. The Scattering was survival. The pieces ran. The pieces hid. In hosts. In vessels.

And now the hunter is tracking the pieces.

Yes. Violet's presence pressed against Ace's mind. The more pieces gather. The more hosts carry Fragments. The brighter the signal. The hunter follows the signal.

So if we reassemble...

We call the hunter. Quiet. But if we stay scattered, the hunter finds us anyway. It's been hunting for centuries. It's patient. It will find every Fragment eventually.

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

What do you want?

I want to stop running. Violet's presence shifted. But I don't want to consume you. The integration takes centuries. The release...

The release might kill me.

Yes.

And the hunter will find me eventually anyway.

Yes.

Ace's shadow-pressure settled. Then we need a third option.

The triad found each other after the Codex reading. No one spoke. The weight of visions shared.

The safehouse was quiet. Climate-controlled air that Shammy couldn't read. Sterile surfaces that didn't hold resonance. A room designed to contain, not comfort.

They gathered around the table. Mai's notes spread across the surface. Pattern diagrams, containment equations, translations of the hidden text. The mechanical bird in Ace's pocket, ticking its rhythm. Shammy's hair still lifted from atmospheric response to emotion she couldn't release.

Shammy broke the silence first. "The manuscript showed me something. Before."

"The storm." Flat.

"The question." Shammy's warmth thinned. "Whether I chose wrong. Whether I should have stayed weather."

"What did you see?"

"A storm. Not my storm." Shammy's hair lifted. "The one I was before I chose to be a person. The Codex asked if I regretted it."

"Do you?"

Shammy's atmospheric pressure shifted. "I see you two. I see the triad. I see what we've built." Warm. "I don't regret the choice. I regret the question. The Codex makes you doubt the things you

shouldn't doubt."

Mai's voice was analytical. "The Codex is a guilt-memetic. It's designed to break the reader. To make them carry their doubt. The Vatican used it on Fragment hosts. To control them. To make them question themselves."

"And the hidden text?" Ace asked.

"The real information is underneath." Mai's pattern-tracing resumed. "You have to see your doubt first. Then you can see the truth."

"That's a trap." Shammy's warmth sharpened. "Not everyone can see past the doubt."

"That's why the thief gave it to us." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "They survived the guilt-memetic. They saw the hidden text. They knew we could too."

"Or they hoped we couldn't." Warm. But careful.

"No." Analytical. "The note. 'You would have kept it. I know you. I was you.' The thief understood. They knew Mai would see the calculation. They knew I'd decode the hidden text."

"They knew we'd need the information." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "About Fragment release. About the Scattering. About the hunter."

The Codex pages lay on the table. The hidden text was clear now.

Fragment release. The cost of liberation. The history of the Scattering. The hunter that fed on Fragment resonance.

The thief had given them a weapon. But they'd also given them a burden.

"The manuscript doesn't guarantee survival." Analytical. "The release method is described. But the outcome is unknown. The thief survived. But they were integrated."

"Integrated means they became one with their Fragment." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "I'm not integrated. Violet and I are separate."

"The release might work differently." Mai's pattern-tracing intensified. "For separate hosts, the manuscript describes a ritual. A separation. The Fragment goes somewhere. Back to where it came from. Into the space between."

"And the host?"

"Survives or doesn't." Analytical. "The text doesn't provide survival rates."

"But the thief survived."

"The thief was integrated." Analytical. "Four hundred years. The Fragment and the host were one entity. When they released, they released themselves. Not something separate."

The clockwork sparrow ticked in her palm. Wind and unwind. The familiar motion.

"I'm not integrated." Flat. "Violet and I are separate. If I release her..."

"The outcome is uncertain." Analytical. "But the manuscript gives us data. We can calculate. The thief knows more than we do. They survived the release. They might know the survival rate for separate hosts."

"And if they don't?"

Mai's hand trembled. "Then we calculate with incomplete data."

Like Tokyo.

The argument continued. But it had changed.

Mai wanted the information. The data. The calculation. She saw the release method as a solvable equation. The survival rate as a probability distribution.

Shammy saw the emotional weight. The cost of carrying doubt. The Codex had shown her the question she'd been avoiding. The choice she'd made. The storm she'd left behind.

And Ace stood between them. Holding the mechanical bird. Holding Violet. Holding the choice.

"Release." Analytical. "The manuscript describes it. The thief survived it. It's possible."

"Possible isn't certain." Shammy's warmth thinned. "The Codex showed us doubt. It didn't show us solutions."

"It showed us information." Mai's pattern-tracing resumed. "Hidden under the guilt. Real information. About Fragment origins. About the Scattering. About the hunter."

"Information that's incomplete." Shammy's hair lifted. "The survival rate is unknown. The outcome is uncertain. That's not a solution. It's a gamble."

"Every containment is a gamble." Analytical. "The equation is never complete. We calculate with the data we have."

"And when the data is wrong?" Shammy's warmth sharpened. "When the pattern you missed costs lives?"

Mai's hand trembled. The pattern on her disruptor pistol stopped. "That's not..."

"It is." Warm. But careful. "The Codex showed you Tokyo. It showed you the pattern you missed. And now you want to calculate release. With incomplete data. Again."

"The situations aren't..."

"They are."

Ace's voice cut through. Flat. Final.

"The triad lock."

Mai and Shammy both turned. Ace's shadow-pressure had settled. The mechanical bird in her palm, ticking its rhythm.

"We go to the monastery." Flat. "The thief's next target. We find the Fragment Catalogue. We learn what we can."

"And the release?" Mai asked.

"We learn the calculation first." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "Then we decide. Together. All three vectors."

Shammy's warmth returned. "The triad lock."

"The triad lock." Warmer. "Depth, Horizontal, Vertical. We face it together."

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

The Codex had shown them their doubt.

But it had also shown them their strength.

The triad. Three vectors. One lock.

Whatever came next, they would face it together.

END OF CHAPTER SEVEN

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