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Chapter 9: The Monastery

The monastery door was iron. A cross welded into the center. Rusted but still cold to touch.

Not cold from temperature. Cold from something else. Iron should warm when you touched it. Should take heat from skin and give it back slowly. This iron didn't warm. It drained. Something had pulled the warmth out decades ago, maybe centuries, and left it empty. Waiting.

Ace pressed her palm against the metal. The cold went deeper than temperature. It had weight. Like the iron remembered being forged for purposes that had left marks in the metal itself. Purposes never documented. Buried under layers of official history.

The monastery had been a containment site. Mai's tablet showed the architectural analysis: ward configurations, containment arrays, suppression fields built into the stone. But under the official purposes, something older. Something that had been here before the monastery was a monastery.

"Temperature's wrong." Mai held up her tablet. The thermal readings glowed. "The metal is absorbing ambient heat instead of radiating it. Not possible in conventional physics."

"Nothing here is conventional." Ace's shadow-pressure pushed against the door. Where the monastery's atmosphere pressed down, her pressure pushed back. "Something's holding this place. Containing it."

Shammy felt it too. The air didn't move here. Didn't respond to her presence. The Vatican archives had been uncomfortable. This was worse. The air was dead. Preserved. Like nothing had breathed in decades.

"Nothing moves here." Shammy's voice was quiet. The warmth in her tone had thinned. "Not even air. There's a boundary. Like a dome. Nothing gets in, nothing gets out."

"Fragment containment site." Mai traced patterns on her tablet. The building's architecture. The containment wards. "The monastery was designed to hold Fragments. Not just manuscripts."

The courtyard beyond the door was empty. Stone paths worn smooth by feet that hadn't walked them in years. A fountain in the center, dry, the basin filled with leaves that had never decayed.

"Preservation field." Mai's fingers moved across her tablet. "The containment architecture isn't just holding things in. It's holding time itself in stasis. Nothing ages. Nothing rots."

"The Vatican built this?" Shammy's atmospheric sense reached outward, testing the boundaries. The air resisted her. Pushed back. "This feels older. The wards have layers. Foundations beneath foundations."

"They maintained it." Mai's pattern-tracing intensified. "The original structure predates the Vatican's involvement. But the containment modifications are theirs. At least two centuries."

Ace's shadow-pressure expanded through the courtyard. Where the air didn't move, her pressure moved. The room felt smaller. More compressed.

"Someone was here recently." Flat. "The air is responding to me. But there's a gap. A void where someone else was."

"The thief." Mai was already working. "They came for the Catalogue."

"How recently?" Shammy's warmth sharpened. "I can't feel the air currents. Too suppressed. But there's something. Residue. Like smoke without fire."

"Days." The clockwork sparrow ticked. Wound tight. "Maybe a week. The void is fading."

The monastery was built into the hillside. Stone corridors leading underground. Not catacombs. Containment architecture. Mai read the patterns in the walls. The structure was designed to channel, to redirect, to suppress.

"This section was for research." Mai's tablet displayed the ward configurations. "Isolation chambers. Observation points. They separated Fragment hosts by type. By volatility."

"Volatility?" Shammy's hair lifted slightly. The atmospheric suppression flickered. "They rated people by how dangerous they were?"

"By how unstable their Fragment containment was." Clinical. "At least twelve cells. Each one reinforced differently. Wards carved into the stone. Boundaries that could hold even if the host lost control."

Ace moved through the corridor. Shadow-pressure expanding. Cells on either side. Doors with observation windows. Restraint points built into the walls. The architecture of containment. Not for manuscripts. Not for artifacts.

For people.

They found the first cell at the end of the eastern wing.

Not a manuscript storage. A containment cell for a person. A Silent Vessel. The walls were marked. Scratches in the stone. A pallet bed. Chains mounted at intervals. Restraint points. The cell was small. Eight feet by eight. A person could stand. Could lie down. Could not pace. Could not move beyond the reach of the chains.

Mai traced the containment architecture. Old wards. Older containment.

"This place held Fragment hosts." Her fingers moved across patterns in the stone. "Not manuscripts. People. Silent Vessels who were studied. Contained. Tested."

Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out. The air was still dead. But she could feel the resonance. The weight of containment. The pressure of people who had been held here.

"They studied them." Shammy's warmth sharpened. "The Vatican. They made hosts. Then they

contained them. Kept them in cells like animals.”

“The Fragment Catalogue.” Mai's pattern-tracing intensified. “Volume VII. It's not just records. It's the results. What they learned about Fragment hosts. Host survival rates. Integration metrics. Release attempts.”

“The thief wants to destroy it.” Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. “To prevent anyone from making more hosts.”

“Or to prevent anyone from learning the release method.” Mai looked up from the tablet. “The Catalogue contains the full formula. The survival rates. The complete data on Fragment release.”

The western wing held more cells. Deeper underground. Older architecture.

Shammy stopped at the entrance. “The air's different here. Heavier. The suppression is older.”

“Higher security.” Mai traced the ward patterns. “These cells were for the most unstable hosts. The ones who couldn't control their Fragment integration.”

Ace entered the first cell. Shadow-pressure expanded. The space contracted around her. The walls were covered in scratch marks. Not random. Patterns. Someone had been counting. Days. Weeks. Years.

Violet pressed against her consciousness. Responding to the resonance. The cell still carried the weight of someone who had held a Fragment. Someone like her.

She was here. Violet's presence expanded. *Another vessel. Another host. The walls remember her.*

What happened to her?

Containment. Study. Release attempts. Violet's presence shifted. *Some released. Some integrated. Some... didn't.*

They found the cell at the end of the corridor. The deepest one. The most heavily warded.

This cell was different. The scratch marks were organized. Not counting. Writing. Words carved into the stone. A record.

Ace entered. Shadow-pressure expanded. The space contracted around her. The clockwork sparrow in her palm ticked steadily.

The words on the wall were in Latin. Mai read them aloud.

“Subject integrated at age seven. Fragment designation: Ember-class. Volatility: high. Integration period: three years. Release attempted: four times. Release successful: zero.”

Shammy's warmth drained. “Seven years old.”

The Vatican's research. Creating hosts. Testing integration. Looking for ways to contain Fragments in human vessels.

The cell had more writing. Notes. Observations. A person's life reduced to data points.

“Year one: Subject shows stability. Fragment responds to verbal commands. Year three: Subject shows degradation. Volatility increases. Fragment integration reaches sixty percent. Year five: Subject begins speaking in voices not their own. Year seven: Release attempted. Subject survived. Fragment reintegrated. Year eight: Subject requests termination. Request denied. Year nine: Subject stops speaking. Year ten: Subject stops eating. Fragment sustains. Year twelve: Release attempted. Subject died. Fragment released successfully.”

Ace's shadow-pressure fluctuated. The void around her contracted.

Ace. Violet's presence pressed. *This is what they wanted. How to make hosts. How to use hosts. How to release hosts when they were done.*

You knew about this?

No. Quiet. But I remember feeling it. Other vessels. Other pieces. The Fragment network. We sense each other. Even across distances. I felt them. The ones who were studied here.

I felt them die.

Ace's hand touched the wall. Cold stone. But beneath the cold, something else. A resonance. A memory pressed into the stone.

A woman's face. Older. Scarred from Fragment containment. Eyes that had seen too much. Eyes that had chosen to stop seeing.

You can refuse. The woman's voice. Not in words. In pressure. In the feeling of presence. *You can let go. The binding is not permanent. You can release.*

The vision expanded. Not just a face. A room. A cell. Chains. The feeling of Fragment integration. Something inside, pressing, wanting to be whole. And the choice. The moment of choosing.

I chose to let go. The woman's resonance filled the space. *Not because they wanted me to. Because I wanted to. They tried to take it. Study it. Control it. But the choice was mine.*

The vision showed her the release. Not violent. Not the Blood-Moon Event. Something gentler. A Fragment separating from its host. The host surviving. The Fragment going somewhere else.

Where did it go? Ace asked. *When you released it?*

I don't know. Fading. I felt it leave. I felt the space it left behind. And then I felt... peace. For the first time in twelve years. Peace.

But you died.

Everyone dies. Almost gone. I died free. That's what matters. The binding is not permanent. You can release. You can survive. You can choose.

The vision faded. The cell was empty. But the resonance remained.

“What did you see?” Mai's hand was on Ace's shoulder. Grounding.

"A woman." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "A Fragment host. She was here. She spoke to me through the walls."

"What did she say?"

"She said I could refuse." The clockwork sparrow ticked in her palm. "That the binding isn't permanent. That I can release. That I can survive."

"Did she survive the release?" Shammy's warmth was thin.

"She survived long enough." Flat. "She died free. That's what she wanted me to know."

Violet's presence stirred. *She's telling the truth. The release is possible. The Fragment separates. But...*

But what?

But most hosts don't survive. Violet's presence was quiet. The woman in the wall was unusual. Designed to hold Fragments. Trained. Years of integration. Her release was controlled.

And mine would be what?

Unknown. Quieter still. You're different. Not a trained vessel. An accident. A survivor. Your integration is unstable. The release might not work the same way.

Or it might work better.

Or it might kill you.

Shammy felt the atmospheric gap. The void in the air. The thief had been here.

"They came for the Catalogue." Shammy's warmth was thin. "But they didn't take it."

"How do you know?"

"The air remembers." Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out. "The thief was here. They searched the monastery. They found the Catalogue's location. But they didn't take it."

"Why not?"

"They destroyed it." Shammy's hair lifted. "Like the others. Burned it. The fire is still burning. Without fuel."

Mai's tablet showed the thermal readings. "There's a heat signature. Inner chamber. But no oxygen consumption. The fire isn't burning fuel."

"It's burning something else." Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. "A Fragment."

The fire was in the inner chamber. Deep in the monastery's underground. A ritual space. Stone floors carved with wards. And in the center, a fire that burned without fuel.

Not a natural flame. A ritual fire. Consuming something else.

The manuscript had been destroyed. Burned in the fire that still burned. But the fire itself was the manuscript. The entity was the fire.

"Another piece." Mai studied the readings. "Like Violet. But burned. Less coherent."

The flames moved. Not randomly. Responding to presence. Reaching toward them.

"Bound to a manuscript. Not a host." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded.

"The manuscript was the vessel." Mai traced patterns. "The fire is the Fragment. Released from its container. But not entirely. Still here. Still burning."

The flames reached toward Ace. Violet. Responding to the resonance. Another piece of the Scattered. Trying to join.

"Violet." Not to the fire. To her Fragment. "What is it?"

Another piece. Violet's presence expanded. *Less coherent than me. Burned. Fragmented further. It wants to join.*

Join with you?

Join with us. Shifting. *It's lonely. It's been burning for decades. It wants to be whole again.*

What happens if it joins?

I don't know. Quiet. *The integration takes centuries. But you're already a Silent Vessel. Designed to hold Fragments. Maybe you can hold more.*

Or maybe I collapse.

Maybe.

Shammy compressed the air around the flames. Not to extinguish. To contain. The atmospheric pressure created a boundary. The fire pressed against it. Not hostile. Reaching.

"It's not attacking." Shammy's warmth was thin. "It's lonely."

"Like Violet." Mai worked the patterns. "But less coherent. Burning since the manuscript was destroyed."

"The thief tried to destroy it." Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. "But the Fragment survived. The fire is still here."

"The thief isn't all-powerful." Mai looked up. "They have limits. They couldn't destroy this Fragment. So they left it burning."

"What do we do with it?"

Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out. The fire was responding to Ace. To Violet. To the resonance of another Fragment.

"It wants to join with you." Shammy's warmth sharpened. "With Violet. It's been isolated for decades. Burning. Alone."

The tiny mechanism ticked. Wound tight. The rhythm of survival.

Violet. What happens if I let it in?

You become a container. Violet's presence pressed against her mind. Not just for me. For both of us. Two Fragments. One host.

Can I hold two?

I don't know. Quiet. The integration takes centuries. But you're already a Silent Vessel. Designed to hold Fragments. Maybe you can hold more.

Or maybe I collapse.

Maybe.

What does it feel like? Being burned like that?

Alone. Violet shifted. It's been alone since the manuscript was destroyed. The thief burned the text, but the Fragment survived. Trapped in flames. Wanting. Reaching.

Can you talk to it?

I can. Expanding. Should I?

Yes. Find out what it wants.

Violet's presence extended. Not into the fire. Toward it. A resonance.

What is it saying? Ace asked.

It's not saying words. Quiet. It's feeling. Impressions. It remembers being bound. Being whole. Then being burned. Trapped. It's been reaching for anything that resonates. Anything that feels like the Scattered.

It recognizes you.

It recognizes what I was. What we all were. Before the scattering. Shifting. It wants to join. But it's scared. It's been burned. It doesn't trust containers.

Can you teach it? Teach it to trust?

I can try. Violet extended further. The flames responded. Shifted. The pressure changed.

The fire-entity wasn't attacking. It was reaching. Trying to communicate. Trying to join.

It's learning. Quieter now. I'm showing it what you feel like. What a container feels like. Safe. Held. Not alone.

Is it working?

The fire is calming. The Fragment inside is listening. Shifting again. It wants to join. It wants to not be alone anymore.

The fire-entity reached toward Ace. The flames shifted. Violet. Responding to the resonance.

Shammy's atmospheric pressure held the boundary. Mai's calculation worked through the pattern. But neither of them could stop what was happening.

Ace stood at the edge of the fire. The Fragment inside her. The Fragment outside. Two pieces of the Scattered. Trying to join.

I can hold you. Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. Not forever. But for now.

Can I come in? The fire-entity's presence. Not words. Pressure. Asking.

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

Yes.

The fire entered her. Not violently. Gently. A Fragment that had been alone for decades. Burning. Lonely. Wanting to be whole.

Violet expanded to make room. The two Fragments pressed against each other. Not fighting. Coexisting. Two pieces of the Scattered. One host.

Ace's shadow-pressure fluctuated. The void around her expanded. Contracted. Expanded again.

Then settled.

Two Fragments. One vessel.

You're not alone anymore. Violet's presence was quiet. Neither am I.

The monastery was searched. The thief had been there. Had found the Catalogue. Had destroyed it. The Fragment that remained was now inside Ace.

Mai worked through the data on her tablet. The containment architecture. The ward patterns. The research records carved into the cell walls.

“The Fragment Catalogue wasn't just records.” Her voice was thin. “It was the Vatican's complete research. Integration protocols. Release formulas. Host survival rates. Everything they learned from studying Silent Vessels.”

"The thief destroyed it." Shammy's warmth was thin. "All of it."

"Not all." Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. "There's a reference to another text. Fragment Catalogue Volume VIII. Research continuation. The monastery held Volume VII. But the Vatican archive held the earlier volumes. Volume VIII was their most recent work."

"They're burning everything." Ace's shadow-pressure was unstable. Fluctuating. "The Protocol. The Catalogue. Anything that teaches Fragment creation. Fragment containment."

"And anything that teaches release." Mai looked up. "The thief is destroying knowledge. Both sides of it. Creation and release."

"Why would they destroy the release method?"

"They didn't." Mai traced the pattern. "The woman in the wall. She released her Fragment. She survived. The thief isn't destroying release. They're keeping it to themselves."

The fire was still burning. But the Fragment was gone. Absorbed into Ace.

Shammy's atmospheric sense felt the change. The dead air was responding again. To Ace's expanded shadow-pressure. To the weight of two Fragments.

"The air is moving." Shammy's warmth returned. "Whatever was suppressing this place, it's responding to you now. The containment is breaking down."

"Two Fragments in one host." Mai traced patterns. "The pressure is creating stability. But it's temporary."

"Temporary is enough." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "We find the thief. We learn the release. Then we decide what to do with what we're carrying."

"Two Fragments." Shammy's warmth was thin. "You're holding two Fragments now. The weight will pull you apart."

"Then we find the thief fast." The clockwork sparrow ticked. "Before the weight pulls me apart."

Mai's calculation was working through the pattern. The variables. The Fragments. The survival rate.

"Two Fragments in one host is unprecedented." Her hand trembled. She pressed it flat against the tablet. "The containment architecture isn't designed for it. Your shadow-pressure is designed to hold one. Two will destabilize you."

"I know."

"The thief couldn't destroy this Fragment. They left it burning. They moved on." The pattern-tracing stopped. "You just absorbed something they couldn't handle."

"I know."

"You're carrying more than you should." Her hand trembled again. "The equation is becoming

unstable.”

“I know.”

“The woman in the wall.” Shammy's warmth was sharp. “She released her Fragment. She survived. The thief survived. There's a way. We just have to find it.”

“The thief has the release method.” Mai's voice was tight. “They survived. They know the formula. They can teach us.”

“And if they won't?”

“Then we take what we need.” Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. “They've been destroying records. Preventing anyone from creating more Silent Vessels. But they haven't been teaching hosts how to release.”

“Maybe they can't.” Shammy's warmth sharpened. “Maybe they only know their own release. The integrated one.”

“Then we learn from what they know.” Mai's fingers moved across her palm. “And we calculate the rest.”

The monastery held one more secret.

In the deepest cell. The one without scratch marks. The one without writing. An empty room with a single chair. And restraints bolted into the floor.

Mai's tablet showed the ward configuration. “This cell was for the original Fragment. The first one. Before it was scattered.”

“The Vatican had the whole Fragment?” Shammy's atmospheric sense pressed against the walls. “Here?”

“No.” Mai traced the pattern. “They had a piece. The largest piece. They were trying to study it. Control it. The containment failed.”

“When?”

“Forty years ago.” Flat. “The Fragment broke free. Killed everyone in the monastery. Then scattered. The pieces became what we call Fragments now. Violet. The fire-entity. All the others.”

“The Blood-Moon Event.” Ace's shadow-pressure fluctuated. “That was forty years ago too.”

“Not a coincidence.” The pattern-tracing stopped. “The Fragment that scattered. The Silent Vessels that were created. Something happened forty years ago. The Vatican lost control. The Fragment split. And the pieces found hosts.”

“Found.” The tiny mechanism ticked steadily. “Or were placed.”

“The Vatican was making hosts.” Shammy's warmth was thin. “They had the Fragment. They were studying it. When it broke free, it found them. The hosts. The vessels.”

“Or they found it.” Mai looked at the ward patterns on the wall. “The Fragment Catalogue was their research. Their records. When the thief burns them, they're not just destroying knowledge. They're destroying evidence.”

The triad left the monastery. The fire had been absorbed. The Fragment Catalogue had been destroyed. But the thief's trail remained.

“They're going to the Vatican next.” Mai's tablet showed the trajectory. “The Protocol. The remaining manuscripts. They're burning the knowledge of Fragment creation.”

“And we need to find them before they finish.” Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. “Not to stop them. To learn from them.”

“The release method.” The pattern-tracing stopped. “The survival rate. The calculation.”

“Yes.” Settled. “I'm holding two Fragments now. I need to know what happens if I release them.”

The monastery was behind them. The iron cross on the door still cold. The air still dead. But the weight remained.

Two Fragments. One host. The equation was changing.

END OF CHAPTER NINE

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