



Chapter 6: The Hymn Under the Skin

The new rhythm didn't enter through the ears.

It entered through the ribs.

Ace felt it like a second heartbeat trying to sync with her own—slow at first, then insistent, pushing into the spaces between breaths. The dust corset around her torso tightened, not to crush, but to hold her in place the way a hand holds a tuning fork.

The priest stood at the edge of the circle like he owned the air.

And the figures in the shadows—those half-human choir remnants—began to hum again, but not in the old three-beat pattern. This was longer. Layered. A melody that kept trying to resolve and never did.

Mai fired again—short burst, controlled, angled to shear the dust spiral without hitting Ace.

The disruptor pulse hit the black coil and vanished into it like a stone into a swamp. The coil didn't

break. It got denser.

Mai's eyes widened a fraction. "It's eating the field."

The priest smiled. "It's learning the field."

Ace's shadow-pressure aura surged, pushing outward. Emerald fracture-lines lit along the air around her body, a tight halo of force.

The dust answered with pressure of its own—dry, cold, deliberate. Not just "darkness." This was structured absence, wrapped around her like instructions.

Violet's presence under Ace's ribs didn't claw.

It leaned forward.

Ace could feel the echo's attention like teeth against the inside of her skin.

Oh, Violet whispered, delighted. He brought the old song.

Ace's jaw clenched. "Mai," she said, voice tight but steady, "don't shoot the dust again."

Mai's gaze snapped to her. "What?"

"It's feeding on it," Ace said. "It wants you to give it more."

Mai's lips peeled back. "Then what do we do?"

Ace inhaled slowly through the corset's pressure. "We make it starve."

The priest's tone softened, almost conversational. "You think you can starve a hymn?"

Mai's answer was sharp. "We can starve anything if we cut the supply line."

The priest chuckled. "Then cut it."

The dust tightened again, forcing a shallow breath from Ace.

For half a heartbeat, her vision blurred at the edges.

And the memory flickered.

Candles in a circle. Red light on stone. A child kneeling, palms up. A voice—many voices—singing the hymn. Not beautiful. Not even in tune. But relentless, because it didn't need to be pretty. It needed to repeat until it became truth.

Ace's hands twitched toward her swords.

The dust corset sensed the movement and constricted.

Ace's breath hitched.

Mai stepped closer, disruptor held low now, eyes scanning the room's edges. "Where is it coming from?"

Ace forced her focus outward, beyond the pressure. The room had changed when the priest snapped his fingers, but it hadn't become infinite. It still had structure—walls, shadows, corners.

The hymn wasn't coming from everywhere.

It was coming from one place pretending to be everywhere.

Ace's eyes narrowed toward the far side where the shadows were thickest.

There.

A dark seam in the air, like a tear that had been sewn shut but still leaked. The hymn's resonance threaded out of it, feeding the dust coil, feeding the choir remnants.

Mai followed Ace's gaze and understood instantly. "Emitter," she whispered. "He's running the hymn through a breach."

The priest's smile widened, pleased they were catching up. "Good," he said. "You can still learn."

Mai's voice went flat. "I learned enough."

She raised the disruptor—then didn't fire.

Instead, she turned the pistol slightly and thumbed a rune sequence along the side—three quick taps, a pause, two slower ones. The runes pulsed in a new pattern, no longer projecting outward in pulses.

They began to interfere.

Mai wasn't trying to destroy. She was trying to desync.

The disruptor's hum shifted, low and angry, like a bass note trying to drown out a choir.

The hymn in the room wavered.

Just a fraction.

The priest's eyes narrowed. "Stop that."

Mai smiled without warmth. "No."

Ace felt the dust coil loosen a millimeter as the hymn lost cohesion. Not much. But enough for Ace to draw a deeper breath.

She used that breath like a crowbar.

Her shadow-pressure aura compressed inward, then pushed outward in a single dense shove—not a blast, but a pulse tuned to Mai's interference frequency.

The dust coil shuddered.

It didn't break, but it slipped—momentarily losing its perfect grip.

Ace's left katana slid free, emerald light flashing as the blade cleared its sheath.

The dust tried to tighten again.

Ace didn't fight the tightening.

She used it.

She let the dust coil pull her torso a fraction forward—and then she cut through the pull, slicing the dust not like smoke but like cloth, blade humming with pressure that made the air scream softly.

A slash of emerald.

The coil split.

Black dust scattered—not fleeing, but falling, suddenly without enough hymn resonance to keep structure.

Ace sucked in a full breath, shoulders rising as relief hit hard.

Mai's disruptor interference continued, steady, like she was holding a tone in the air.

The priest's smile cracked for the first time, irritation seeping through the calm. "You shouldn't be able to do that."

Ace's voice was low, rough. "You shouldn't be here."

The priest's eyes flicked to the scattered dust, then to the seam in the shadows.

He understood the same thing Ace and Mai did:

If the breach-seam died, the hymn died.

If the hymn died, his new trick died.

So he moved.

Fast.

Not human-fast. Not engine-fast.

A priest shouldn't be able to cross the room in a blink.

But he did.

He lunged toward the shadow seam, hand outstretched—not to protect it, but to feed it, to reinforce it with whatever stolen structure he'd brought.

Mai reacted instantly, shifting aim and firing a tight disruptor pulse at the priest's feet.

The pulse hit the stone and rippled upward like a shockwave.

The priest's step faltered for half a second.

Enough for Ace.

Ace was already moving, semi-shadow folding around her legs, making her sprint look like a blur that reality struggled to track. She didn't teleport; she cut distance, slicing through the space between moments.

She intercepted the priest with her shoulder, slamming into him hard enough to make his collar twist.

They crashed to the floor.

The priest's hand clawed toward Ace's chest.

Not to punch. Not to choke.

To touch the place where Violet's fragment lived.

Ace caught his wrist.

The contact made her skin crawl.

The priest smiled up at her, breath calm despite the impact. "There you are," he whispered. "Right under the skin."

Violet stirred—warm and eager. Let me hurt him.

Ace tightened her grip until bone creaked.

"No," Ace hissed—not to him. To Violet.

The priest's smile widened, delighted by the internal conflict. "You still think you can keep her leashed."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "I can."

The priest's other hand moved—quick, sneaky—toward his wrist brace.

Mai saw it.

"ACE!" Mai shouted.

Ace glanced too late.

The brace wasn't just a splint.

It was a device.

Foundation-grade metal, sigil-etched, with a tiny embedded shard socket.

And the priest thumbed it.

A faint glow ignited.

The hymn surged.

The room's shadows thickened.

The seam in the darkness widened a hair.

And the choir remnants at the edge of the room lifted their heads in unison, mouths opening wider, humming louder—like the device was amplifying them.

Mai fired at the brace.

The pulse hit—

—and the brace absorbed it like the dust had.

Mai's eyes went wide. "What the—"

The priest laughed softly. "We learn."

Ace's chest tightened.

The hymn hammered at her ribs again.

Violet surged.

Not to seize control—still blocked by the contract—but to press against it, testing boundaries, whispering promises.

He's using your old chain, Violet purred. Let me show him what a real hymn sounds like.

Ace's vision flickered red again.

Mai's voice cut through, sharp and present. "Ace. Eyes."

Ace snapped her focus to Mai's face.

Mai's gaze was hard, furious, unwavering.

Anchor.

Ace inhaled and forced the hymn pressure down.

Her shadow-aura tightened like a vice.

The priest's smile faltered as Ace's grip on his wrist became crushing.

Ace yanked his arm up and slammed the brace against the stone floor.

Once.

Twice.

The brace sparked, but didn't break.

The priest hissed, irritation finally leaking. "Stop."

Ace's lips curled. "Make me."

Mai sprinted in, disruptor still humming interference. She didn't fire. She slid beside Ace and grabbed the priest's brace with her free hand—ignoring the heat, ignoring the wrongness.

Mai's eyes narrowed, analyzing at speed. "Shard socket," she muttered. "It's not absorbing. It's routing."

Ace held the priest pinned.

“Then cut the route,” Ace said.

Mai’s mouth tightened. “I need a grounded counter-frequency.”

Ace didn’t hesitate.

She slammed the tip of her katana into the stone floor beside the priest’s arm, embedding it like a lightning rod. Emerald light flared along the blade.

Mai pressed the brace against the katana’s flat—metal to metal—and thumbed a rune on the disruptor that made the gun’s hum drop into a lower register.

The katana vibrated.

The brace vibrated.

The hymn wavered.

The shadow seam flickered.

For a heartbeat, everything in the room held its breath.

Mai’s voice went very calm. “Ace. Push.”

Ace pushed.

Shadow-pressure surged through the katana like current.

The brace screamed—a high metallic whine—and then the embedded socket flared and cracked, a hairline fracture racing across its surface.

The priest’s eyes widened in real panic for the first time. “No—”

Mai didn’t hesitate.

She drove the disruptor’s barrel into the cracked socket and fired point-blank.

The pulse didn’t explode outward.

It detonated inward.

The brace collapsed with a soft pop, like a sealed container losing vacuum.

The hymn snapped—mid-note—into silence.

The choir remnants staggered.

The shadow seam shivered and shrank, like a wound trying to close.

The dust on the floor went dead—just dust again.

Ace felt the pressure in her ribs ease all at once.

Violet inside her snarled in frustration, then went still, listening to the sudden quiet like an animal shocked by the absence of noise.

The priest lay pinned, breathing harder now, sweat at his hairline.

Mai stood, shoulders heaving, and aimed the disruptor at his face.

“Who funded you?” Mai demanded.

The priest coughed a laugh. “You still think money is the only currency.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “Then what is?”

The priest’s gaze slid to Ace’s chest again, hungry even now. “You,” he whispered. “You are the currency.”

Mai’s finger tightened on the trigger.

Ace lifted a hand slightly—stopping her.

Mai’s eyes snapped to Ace. “Ace, don’t—”

Ace’s voice was low. “Not yet.”

Because the room—now quiet—was doing something else.

The stone circle lines, which had gone dark, began to glow again.

Not gray-violet this time.

Emerald.

Ace’s stomach dropped.

Mai’s gaze whipped to the floor. “That’s your frequency.”

Ace swallowed once.

The shadow seam at the far edge of the room pulsed—closing, yes, but also...marking.

Like a system saving a state before shutdown.

The priest’s smile returned, faint and cruel. “Do you feel it?” he murmured. “The room remembers you now.”

Ace’s hands tightened around her blades.

Inside her, Violet whispered, delighted again despite the setback.

Now the city sings you back, Violet purred.

And then the emerald-lit circle under Ace’s feet clicked—

—and the floor fell away.

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