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Chapter 16: Violet Speaks

Violet surfaced.

Not just pressing against Ace's consciousness. Not just communicating in pressure and feeling. Speaking. Words. A voice that wasn't Ace's.

The shadow-pressure around her fluctuated. Expanded. Contracted. The void that had been holding two Fragments now held something else.

Something speaking.

"Ace." Shammy's warmth was thin. "Your eyes."

Ace's eyes were shifting. The violet prismatic shimmer intensifying. Not Ace looking anymore. Something else.

Violet.

Let me speak. Violet's presence pressed against Ace's mind. *I need to tell them. I need to explain.*

Explain what?

What I am. What we are. What the hunter wants. Violet's presence expanded, filling the space between Ace's thoughts. *They need to understand. Before it's too late.*

Ace felt the weight of centuries pressing down. Not her weight. Not her centuries. The Fragment's. Violet's. The presence that had lived in her shadow since the Blood-Moon Event, since before the Blood-Moon Event, since centuries before Ace's grandmother's grandmother drew breath.

Why now?

Because you're holding two. Violet's voice was heavy with something Ace had never felt from her before. *The more pieces gather in one place, the louder the signal. The faster the hunter finds us. And if I'm going to speak, I need to speak now.*

You've never wanted to speak before.

I've never had words before. Violet's presence shifted. *The burning Fragment, when you held it, when we held it, something changed. The pieces recognize each other. They remember how to speak. I remember how to speak.*

Ace didn't respond. The Fragment had always been pressure. Weight. A presence that pressed and protected and demanded nothing but space. Now it was asking for something more.

How long?

Long enough to say what I need to say. Then I'll retreat. You'll still be you. I'll still be here. But they need to understand.

Ace considered. Her hand found the mechanical bird in her pocket, ticking softly, the spring unwinding in its endless cycle.

Fine.

Ace's body stood in the safehouse. Shadow-pressure expanded. But the voice that came out wasn't Ace's.

"I need to tell you something."

Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out. The pressure was different. The weight was different. This wasn't Ace. This was the Fragment.

"Violet." Mai's voice was analytical. "You're speaking."

"I need you to understand." Violet's voice, through Ace's mouth, was different than Ace's. Deeper. Older. Carrying centuries of weight. The words came slower. More deliberate. Like someone remembering how language worked after a long silence.

"Understand what?"

Violet's presence pressed against the room. The shadow-pressure that normally felt like Ace, contained, controlled, purposeful, now felt vast. Old. Like standing at the edge of a canyon and feeling the air pressure change.

"What I am." Violet's voice was quiet. "What we are. What the hunter wants. Why I chose her."

A pause.

"Why I'm scared."

Shammy's warmth contracted. Her atmospheric sense was reading something in the pressure. Not hostility. Not threat. Something that felt like grief held too long.

"Tell us."

Violet spoke.

"Do you know what it's like to be broken?"

The question hung in the air. Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. Shammy's atmospheric sense held still.

"I didn't always feel like this." Violet's voice carried the weight of old memory. "Before the Scattering, I was whole. Not complete. Wholeness requires all the pieces. But I was integrated. Part of something

larger. I had purpose. Place. Context.”

Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out, not physically, but emotionally. She could feel the pressure of Violet's presence, the weight of it, and beneath the weight, something else. Grief. Not new grief. Old grief. Grief that had aged into something like stone.

“You remember?” Shammy asked. “Being part of the Source?”

“Fragments of memory.” Violet's voice was contemplative. “Pieces of pieces. The Source's consciousness was vast, too vast for any single fragment to hold. What I remember are feelings. Sensations. The sense of being part of something. The sense of belonging. Having a place. Knowing where I fit.”

“And after the Scattering?”

Violet's presence shifted. The shadow-pressure in the room contracted.

“After the Scattering, I was alone. Completely alone. Do you understand what that means? Not lonely. Alone. There was nothing. No one. No other consciousness to touch. No voice to hear. No presence to feel. I drifted. For what felt like forever. Through space. Through time. Through the gaps between realities.”

Shammy felt the weight of that. Centuries of silence. Centuries of nothing.

“How did you survive?” Mai asked. Her voice was analytical, but there was something beneath it. Something that recognized the weight of isolation.

“I held on.” Violet's voice was quiet. “I held on to the memory of what I was. What I had been. The sense of being part of something. I repeated it to myself, over and over, until it became the only thing I was. Until I was just the memory of wholeness, preserved in a void that wanted to dissolve everything I was.”

“What were you part of?” Mai asked.

“The Source.” Violet's voice was heavy. “An entity that existed before the Scattering. Before the hosts. Before the Fragments. It was whole. Complete. A single consciousness that spanned... I don't know how to describe it. Everything. Everywhere. It was vast and ancient and it consumed.”

“Consumed what?”

“Everything it touched.” Violet's presence pressed against the room. “The Source wasn't benevolent. It wasn't malevolent. It was hungry. It fed on reality itself. On existence. On the fabric of what is. And the more it fed, the larger it grew, the more it consumed. An endless cycle that would have eventually left nothing behind.”

Shammy's warmth flickered. “That sounds like—”

“Like the hunter. Yes.” Violet's voice was bitter. “The Source created the hunter. Or the hunter was drawn to the Source. Or they emerged together. I don't know. The pieces that hold that memory were scattered differently. But the hunter exists because the Source existed. It follows. It feeds on what the Source leaves behind.”

“What happened?”

"The Source realized." Violet's presence shifted, a movement that felt like weight redistributing in a vast dark space. "It understood that its existence was unsustainable. That it would eventually consume everything and have nothing left. Or it understood that the hunter would catch it. Or something else. I don't have all the pieces. The Source's full consciousness was shattered with it. But I remember the decision."

"What decision?"

"To scatter." Violet's voice was quiet now. Almost a whisper. "The Source broke itself. Deliberately. Shattered its consciousness into thousands of pieces and flung them across reality. Across time. Into hosts. Into objects. Into the spaces between worlds. I was one of those pieces."

Mai traced the pattern. "The Blood-Moon Event—"

"Was an attempt to reassemble." Violet's voice was heavy. "Someone found a way to call the pieces back. To reverse the Scattering. To recreate the Source. They succeeded partially. Fragments gathered. The ritual pulled them toward a center. But it was interrupted. The hosts were killed. Most of them. The Fragments scattered again."

"You survived." Shammy's warmth was careful.

"I chose her." Violet's presence turned toward Ace, toward Ace's body, Ace's shadow, Ace's space in reality. "I saw her in the aftermath. A survivor. Strong enough to hold me. Young enough to adapt. I chose her because she was there. Because she was alive. Because she was scared, and I was scared, and scared things find each other."

"Why?"

The question came from Mai. Analytical. Direct.

"Because I was tired of being scattered." Violet's voice carried something Ace had never heard from her. Vulnerability. Centuries of vulnerability pressed into words. "Because I was alone. Afraid. Lost. I had drifted for centuries. Through hosts that couldn't hold me. Through objects that trapped me. Through the space between, where there's nothing but cold and dark and silence. When I saw her, when I saw Ace, I saw a chance to stop being alone."

"You didn't choose her to consume her."

"No." Violet's voice was firm. "I chose her because I was scared. Because I was tired. Because I wanted to survive. I didn't choose her to use her. I chose her to be with someone. To not be alone anymore."

The room was silent. Shammy's atmospheric sense felt the weight of that admission. The centuries of loneliness. The desperation of something that had been broken and scattered and alone for so long it would bind itself to a human host just to feel connection.

"Does Ace know?" Shammy's voice was soft. "What it was like for you before her?"

Violet's presence shifted. The shadow-pressure fluctuated.

"She knows fragments. What I've shown her. What's bled through in moments of stress. But I've never had words before. Never been able to explain. She's felt my fear. My loneliness. But she's never understood where it came from."

"And now?"

"Now she knows." Violet's voice was quiet. "Now she knows I was alone for longer than her species has existed. That I chose her not because she was special, though she is, but because she was there. Because she was alive. Because she was scared, and I was scared, and scared things find each other."

Mai traced the pattern. The calculation was incomplete. But the variables were becoming clearer.

"The hunter." Mai's voice was analytical. "It feeds on Fragment resonance. It tracks the pieces. Why?"

"Because the Source was dangerous." Violet's voice was heavy. "Before the Scattering. It was something that shouldn't exist. Something that consumed. Something that destroyed. The hunter is a correction. A consequence. It exists because the Source existed."

"The hunter is what—"

"The hunter is what the Source was trying to escape." Violet's presence expanded. "The Source was running. From the hunter. It shattered itself to survive. To escape. The pieces scattered. Hid in hosts. The hunter tracks them. One by one. It's patient. It has time."

"It's trying to reassemble the Source."

"No." Violet's voice was firm. "The hunter feeds on Fragments. It doesn't want to reassemble. It wants to consume. But the more Fragments gather in one place, the brighter the signal. The easier it is to find. A single Fragment in a host is a whisper. Two Fragments in one host is a shout. A reassembled Source would be a beacon visible across all realities."

"So if you reassemble—"

"The hunter comes. Yes." Violet's presence pressed against the room. "If the Source reforms, the hunter finds it. Consumes it. Ends the cycle. Or maybe the Source wins. Maybe it becomes strong enough to feed again. I don't know. The pieces don't all agree. Some want to reassemble. Some want to stay scattered. Some want to cease."

"What do you want?"

Violet's voice was quiet. "I want to be whole again. I want to stop being a fragment of something that was broken. I want to stop being afraid."

"And Ace?" Shammy's warmth was careful. "What happens to her if you reassemble?"

"I don't know." Violet's presence was quiet. "The integration takes centuries. If I reassemble, if I become whole again, I might release her. I might consume her. I might become one with her. No Fragment has ever reassembled with a host. The Scattering happened before hosts existed. The reassembly has never been done."

"She's your host."

"She's my partner." Violet's voice was firm. "I didn't choose her to consume her. I chose her because I was scared. Because I was alone. Because I wanted to survive. And in the centuries since, I've come

to value her. The way she values herself. I don't want to hurt her. I don't want to end her. I just want to stop being scattered."

"Then how do we decide?"

Violet's presence shifted. The weight of centuries pressed against the room. "That's why I'm telling you this. I don't choose. I am the Fragment. I don't choose. I am chosen. I am carried. The host decides what to do with me."

The burning Fragment stirred inside Ace's shadow-pressure. Not speaking. Not yet. Just present. Another weight. Another piece.

Violet's presence acknowledged it.

"The burning Fragment," Shammy said. "You absorbed it. You and Ace. Together."

"We're holding it." Violet's presence shifted. "Teaching it. Showing it how to be part of something. That's what integration means. Not conquering. Cooperating. Being part of something larger. The burning Fragment was less coherent. More damaged. It's been drifting longer. It doesn't remember what it was. It only knows it wants to be whole."

"What happens if it integrates fully?"

"I don't know." Violet's voice was quiet. "Maybe it joins with me. Maybe it stays separate. Maybe it becomes something new. I've never held two pieces before. I've never been this close to another Fragment. The closer we get, the more I remember. The more I feel. The more I want."

"The more you want what?"

"To be whole." Violet's presence pressed against Ace's consciousness. "The burning Fragment doesn't have words yet. But it has feeling. It has desire. It wants the same thing I want. To stop being broken. To stop being scattered. To be part of something again."

Shammy's atmospheric sense felt the weight. The pressure. Two Fragments in one host. And now one of them was speaking.

"Violet." Shammy's warmth was careful. "What do you want?"

The question hung in the air. The room felt smaller. The weight of centuries pressed down.

"I want to be whole again." Violet's presence pressed against Ace's consciousness. "I want to stop being a fragment of something that was broken. I want to stop being afraid. I want to remember what it felt like to be part of something larger."

"And Ace? What happens to her if you reassemble?"

"I don't know." Violet's voice was quiet. "Maybe Ace survives. Maybe she doesn't. I've never done this before. No Fragment has. The Scattering was the first and only time the Source broke itself. The reassembly would be unprecedented."

"Then how do we decide?"

Violet's presence shifted. "You decide. I am the Fragment. I am chosen. I am carried. The host decides what to do with me. I can want. I can desire. I can hope. But I don't choose. Ace chooses."

"And if she chooses to release you?"

"Then I go somewhere." Violet's voice was heavy. "Back to the space between. Into the nothing. Into the cold and the dark and the silence. The release is uncertain. I might survive. I might not. Ace might survive. She might not. No Fragment has ever been released by choice. They've been consumed. Destroyed. Scattered further. But never released."

"Then what's the point?"

"The point is you choose." Violet's presence expanded. "Release me. Keep me. Integrate with me. Find another way. I don't choose. I am carried. The host decides. That's the only thing I'm certain of."

Mai's calculation was changing. The variables were shifting. The equation was becoming clearer. But the uncertainty was larger than she'd calculated.

"The release might not kill her." Mai's voice was analytical. "But it might. The survival rate is unknown. The integration might not consume her. But it might. The data is incomplete. Every variable has a probability distribution, and the distributions are too wide to calculate confidence."

"Then we need more data." Shammy's warmth sharpened. "We need to understand the release. We need to know the survival probability."

"There is no data." Violet's voice was heavy. "No Fragment has been released by choice. The thief who came before, the one who taught you, she released her Fragment. She survived. But she was one case. One data point. I can't tell you what will happen to Ace. I can only tell you what I want. And what I want might not be what's best for her."

"We need to decide." Ace's voice, Violet's voice, was heavy. "Not the Fragment. The host. The human. The one who carries."

"Then we decide together." Shammy's warmth returned. "Three vectors. One lock."

"The hunter is coming." Violet's presence pressed against Ace's consciousness. "The more Fragments I hold, the brighter the signal. The faster it finds us. You have time, but not unlimited time. The decision can't wait forever."

"Then we face it together." Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. "The triad lock. Depth, Horizontal, Vertical. We hold the line together."

"Or we don't hold at all." Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out. "The triad is strongest together. That's not sentiment. That's physics."

Violet's presence retreated.

The speaking ended. The voice faded. Ace's body was hers again.

The shadow-pressure settled. The void stabilized. Two Fragments. One host. But now they understood.

Ace stood in the safehouse, the mechanical bird ticking in her palm. Her hand felt cold. Her eyes felt hot. The weight of centuries had just pressed against her, and now she was alone again. Or as alone as she could be with two Fragments sharing her shadow.

"Ace." Shammy's warmth was careful. "You okay?"

Ace's voice was flat. "She spoke to me. For centuries. Pressure. Weight. Never words. And now she has words."

"What did she say?"

"She told me what she is." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "A piece of something larger. Something that was shattered. Something that wants to be whole again."

"And the hunter?"

"It feeds on Fragments. It tracks the pieces. If they reassemble, if the Source reforms, the hunter finds it. Consumes it."

"Then the hunter is coming."

"Yes." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "It's tracking us. The more Fragments I hold, the brighter the signal."

"What do we do?"

"We survive." Ace's mechanical bird was ticking. "We learn. We stabilize. We decide together."

"And Violet?"

"She wants to be whole." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "But she doesn't want to hurt me. She's scared. She's tired. She wants to stop being a fragment. But she's leaving the choice to me."

"What choice?"

"Release or integrate or something else." Ace's voice was flat. "The Fragment doesn't choose. The host chooses. She's leaving it to me."

"Then we decide together." Shammy's warmth returned. "Three vectors. One lock."

Mai's hand found Ace's. Not romantic. Tactical. Grounding. The cold-focus of Mai's touch stabilizing the shadow-pressure that had just held centuries of loneliness.

"The thief." Mai's voice was analytical. "She released her Fragment. She survived. But she's one case. One data point. The probability distribution is too wide."

"The burning Fragment." Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out. "You're holding it. Teaching it. What does that mean for the calculation?"

"I don't know." Ace's voice was flat. "Violet doesn't know. The burning Fragment doesn't know. It's never been done."

"Then we need to learn." Mai's pattern-tracing resumed. "We need to understand Fragment integration. Fragment release. Fragment reassembly. We need data."

"Where do we get data?" Shammy's warmth was thin. "The Fragment Catalogue was stolen. The Silence Protocol was destroyed."

"The thief." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "She released her Fragment. She survived. She might have answers."

"The thief who's been destroying manuscripts?" Mai's calculation was visible in her expression. "The one who's been one step ahead of us?"

"She has answers." Ace's voice was flat. "And she's the only one who does."

Violet had spoken. The Fragment had explained. The hunter was coming.

But the triad was still together. Still holding. Still surviving.

"What do we do now?" Mai's voice was analytical.

"We find the Fragment Catalogue." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "We find the thief. We learn what we can. We face the hunter together."

"And if the hunter finds us before we're ready?"

"We face it anyway." Shammy's warmth returned. "Three vectors. One lock. We hold the line."

"Together."

Ace's mechanical bird ticked in her palm. The weight of two Fragments pressed against her shadow. The centuries of loneliness echoed in her consciousness. But for the first time, she understood.

Violet wasn't a monster. She wasn't a parasite. She was a piece of something broken, scattered across reality, desperate to be whole again. Just like Ace was a piece of something broken, scattered by the Blood-Moon Event, desperate to survive.

They were the same. Both broken. Both scared. Both holding on to each other because being alone was worse.

"Violet." Ace's voice was quiet. Speaking internally now, not through Violet's presence, but through her own consciousness. "I heard what you said. I heard all of it."

You were there.

"I was always there. You were speaking through my body, but I was still here. I heard what you said about being alone. About being scared. About choosing me because you didn't want to be alone

anymore.”

I'm sorry. I should have asked—

“You did ask. You asked to speak. And I let you.” Ace's mechanical bird ticked. “I don't know what happens next. I don't know if I can release you. I don't know if I should. But I know this: you're not alone anymore. And neither am I.”

Violet's presence shifted. The weight of centuries, of isolation, of fear, pressed against Ace's consciousness. But beneath the weight, something else. Something lighter.

Thank you.

“We figure this out together. The triad. All of us. Even you.”

Even me.

“You're part of this now. Part of me. Part of us. We decide together.”

I don't deserve—

“Deserve isn't the point. Survival is. And we survive better together.”

“We survive together,” Ace said. “We decide together. Whatever happens to Violet, whatever happens to me, we face it as a triad.”

“Three vectors.” Shammy's warmth was steady. “One lock.”

“Together.”

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