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Chapter 1: The Catalogue Opens

Six months.

The clockwork sparrow in Ace's palm had been wound exactly four thousand three hundred and twelve times since the hunter retreated. She knew because she'd counted. Each morning. Each night. Tension and release, tension and release, the ritual of it.

The mechanical bird ticked. Wind, unwind. The rhythm that kept her anchored when Violet's presence pressed against the inside of her skull.

The Foundation safehouse was sterile. Climate-controlled, sealed, nothing breathing. Shammy complained about it for the first month, then stopped. The air here didn't respond to her. Didn't respond to anything. Mai had calculated that the atmospheric stagnation reduced Shammy's effectiveness by approximately 23%, but the security protocols required it. The Catalogue required it.

The manuscript sat on Mai's desk. Four hundred pages of vellum, leather-bound, sealed with a lock that wasn't physical. Mai had spent six months learning to read it. The text rearranged itself based on who was reading, ritual containment, Foundation-designed, to prevent unauthorized access. But Mai wasn't trying to read it. She was trying to decrypt the lock's architecture.

Ace's shadow-pressure filled the corners. The weight of her made the space feel smaller. Shammy's stormfront contracted in the sterile air. Pressure without movement. Warmth without breath.

"The first layer is cracking." Mai's fingers traced patterns on her palm, rune-structures, circuits, the shapes she used to think through problems. "The Catalogue's containment architecture. It's not Foundation-standard. It's older. The Vatican designed this."

Shammy leaned against the wall, her atmospheric presence dialed down to almost nothing here. "How much older?"

"Centuries. Maybe longer." Mai's fingers didn't stop. "The ritual mathematics are pre-Foundation. But someone updated them. Layered Foundation containment on top of Vatican architecture. The result is..."

She paused.

Her hand trembled. Just slightly. Just enough.

"The result is unstable." Mai pressed her palm flat against her thigh. "The lock wants to open. Something inside wants to be read."

Ace's mechanical bird stopped ticking. The gears went still.

"Violet." The shortest sentences. Shammy had learned to read them. "She's responding. To something in the text."

The Fragment's presence pressed against Ace's consciousness. Not words. Pressure. Recognition. Something in the Catalogue was familiar.

Mai turned a page. The text rearranged itself. Italian shifting to Latin, then to something older. Ritual notation. Mathematical architecture that described containment in terms of binding and release.

"The Scattered." Mai read aloud. "That's what they called it. The entity. Before it was broken."

Ace felt Violet stir. The Fragment's presence expanded. Not hostile, not afraid.

Curious.

"The Catalogue says the Scattered was a single entity." Mai's hand hadn't stopped trembling. "It broke itself apart. Intentionally. To escape something."

The mechanical bird started ticking again. Wind, unwind. Ace's hand had found the rhythm without her conscious choice.

"To escape what?"

"The Hunter." Mai traced the notation. "The entity that consumes wholeness. The Scattered broke itself into pieces, Fragments, to scatter across reality. The Hunter can't find what isn't whole."

Shammy's atmospheric presence expanded slightly. "But gathering the Fragments..."

"Reverses the scattering." Mai nodded. "Gathering Fragments draws the Hunter. Accelerates its return."

The room felt heavier. Ace's shadow-pressure pressed against the walls. Violet's presence was close to the surface. Not surfacing. Ready.

"How many Fragments?"

"The Catalogue lists seven known pieces." Mai turned another page. "Violet is one. The burning Fragment that released. The Anchor that Lale described. Four others that are..."

She stopped.

"That are what?"

"That are being gathered." Mai's tone cracked. "Someone is collecting Fragment signatures. The Catalogue has a tracking system. Someone has been accessing it remotely. From Rome. The Vatican."

Ace's mechanical bird went still. Her shadow-pressure spiked.

"Someone is gathering Fragments. And drawing the Hunter."

"Not someone." Mai's hand pressed flat. "Multiple sources. Three Fragment holders have been compromised in the last two weeks. The signatures were extracted, remotely, not physically. But the extraction was fatal for the hosts."

"The hosts died."

"The hosts died." Mai confirmed. "The Fragments... went somewhere. The Catalogue doesn't track

where.”

Violet's presence pressed against Ace's consciousness. Not words. An image. A sensation. A woman's face. Older. Scarred. A Silent Vessel. Someone who held a Fragment the way Ace held Violet.

She knew me. Violet's presence wasn't voice, but Ace understood. *The one who died. She held a Fragment. She was like us.*

Ace closed her eyes. The mechanical bird in her palm. The weight of Violet inside her. The shadow-pressure that made rooms feel smaller.

“There are others.” Ace opened her eyes. “Other Fragment holders. Like me.”

“Three are dead.” Mai's voice was precise. “The Catalogue lists four more. If someone is gathering signatures...”

“They're drawing the Hunter.” Shammy's warmth was thin in the sterile air. “And the Hunter will come for you next.”

The clockwork sparrow ticked. Wind, unwind.

Violet's presence was closer now. Not surfacing. Present. Watching through Ace's eyes. Reading through Ace's mind.

The Catalogue. Violet's recognition. *I remember it. From before.*

“Before what?” Ace spoke aloud. Shammy looked at her. Mai's fingers paused on the desk.

Before I was scattered. Before I was Violet. I was... more. We were more.

“You remember being the Scattered.”

Fragments. The presence shifted. *I remember pieces. The moment of breaking. The choice to scatter rather than be consumed. Some of us wanted to stay whole. Some of us wanted to scatter. We fought. We broke.*

We scattered.

Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. The room compressed.

“The Hunter.” Ace's voice was flat. “It was coming for you. For the Scattered.”

For all of us. The more whole we become, the closer it gets.

Mai stood. Her hand pressed flat against her thigh. The tremor was visible now. Copper and static. The taste in her mouth before something broke her calculations.

“Can you access the tracking system?” Shammy's voice was soft. “The Catalogue. Can you find the other Fragment holders before they're compromised?”

Mai's fingers moved across the manuscript. The text shifted. Ritual notation resolved into coordinates, names, locations, containment status.

"Lisbon. Istanbul. Morocco. Arctic Station." Mai read. "The four remaining named holders. And..."

She stopped.

Her hand trembled.

"And what?"

"And a notation." The tremor was in her voice now. "Someone has been tracking them. Someone who isn't Foundation. The access signature is Vatican. But the pattern is... military. Organized. Purposeful."

"A collector." Ace's shadow-pressure pushed. "Someone is gathering Fragment signatures. For the Hunter."

Or for themselves. Violet's presence shifted. *Some of us want to be whole again. Some of us would call the Hunter if it meant reunion.*

Dr. Bright's call came at 03:17.

The secure line. Foundation channels. His voice was clinical, but Ace heard the tension underneath.

"We have a situation in Lisbon. A Fragment holder was found dead four hours ago. The body is intact. The Fragment signature is gone."

"Extracted."

"Extracted. We don't know how. We don't know who." Bright's voice carried the weight of things unsaid. "But the extraction pattern matches something in our archives. Something from the Blood-Moon Event."

Ace's mechanical bird stopped ticking.

"The ritual." Shammy's voice was soft. "The one that broke your village. Someone is using it again."

Violet's presence surged. Not hostile. Recognition. Memory. The sensation of burning copper. The moment everything ended.

We were there. Violet's presence pressed. *The ritual that scattered us. The one that created the Fragments. Someone is trying to reverse it.*

"Ace." Mai's voice was precise. "The Catalogue. The tracking system. Someone is accessing it remotely. They have the coordinates for the remaining holders."

"Istanbul. Morocco. The Arctic."

"The collector is racing us." Shammy's warmth expanded. "And they're drawing the Hunter closer with every signature they gather."

The triad prepared to leave. The safehouse was sterile, sealed, nothing breathing. But Ace's shadow-pressure filled the emptiness. Mai's calculations mapped the path. Shammy's stormfront pushed against the stagnation.

"The mechanical bird." Shammy's voice was soft. "You've been winding it more. Since the hunter retreated."

Ace's hand closed around the sparrow. Brass wings. Tiny gears. The rhythm that kept her anchored.

"Violet is closer." Ace's voice was flat. "Six months. She's been more present. More aware. I can feel her wanting."

"Wanting what?"

To remember. Violet's presence answered. To be whole. To not be alone.

"To be whole." Ace's shadow-pressure pushed. "The Catalogue says gathering Fragments draws the Hunter. But Violet wants to gather anyway. She's been pushing. Not hostile. But present."

Mai's hand pressed flat against her disruptor pistol. "The integration technique Lale described. Negotiation with the Fragment. Have you tried..."

"I negotiate." The shortest sentences. "Every day. Every time I wind this bird. She wants to be whole. I want to not be consumed. We meet in the middle."

"Is it working?"

The mechanical bird ticked. Wind, unwind. Ace's shadow-pressure expanded.

"We're still here. Both of us."

That's working.

The transport left at dawn. Foundation tactical vehicle. Sealed atmosphere. Shammy's presence contracted to minimal.

Mai's tablet showed the coordinates. Istanbul. The next named Fragment holder.

"Youssef." Mai read the file. "Fourteen years old. Has held a Fragment for six years. Containment architecture is local. Pre-Foundation. Village-based. His family has protected him."

"A child." Shammy's voice was soft.

"A child who holds something that someone is collecting." Mai's tone didn't soften. "The collector killed three holders already. Youssef is next. Unless we get there first."

Ace's mechanical bird ticked. The rhythm of tension and release.

The child. Violet's presence was close. I know what it is to be young and holding something that wants to be whole. I was bound young. I remember.

"You remember being bound?"

I remember being scattered. The binding came after. Someone found me. Someone chose me. The way you chose me. The way I chose you.

Ace closed her eyes. The mechanical bird in her palm. The weight of Violet inside her. The shadow-pressure that made transport vehicles feel like coffins.

“The collector.” Ace’s voice was flat. “Are we tracking them?”

Mai’s hand tremored. Copper and static. The taste before the equation failed.

“The extraction machine. The one in Lisbon. It left a signature. I can track it.” Her fingers moved across the tablet. “But Ace... the signature is Foundation technology. Modified. Someone inside the Foundation is helping the collector.”

The mechanical bird stopped ticking.

“Someone inside the Foundation is feeding Fragment holders to the Hunter.”

“Not necessarily the Hunter.” Mai’s tone cracked. “The extraction signatures are being sent somewhere. We don’t know where. We don’t know who’s receiving them. But the technology is Foundation. Someone in this organization designed that machine.”

Shammy’s atmospheric presence expanded. “Someone in the Foundation is collecting Fragment signatures. To do what?”

To gather us. Violet’s presence shifted. To make us whole. To call the Hunter. Or to become something the Hunter fears.

Ace opened her eyes. Her shadow-pressure filled the transport. The weight of her presence.

“Then we find them.” The shortest sentence. “Before they find Youssef. Before they find the others. Before they draw the Hunter back.”

The transport moved toward Istanbul. The clockwork sparrow ticked in Ace’s palm. Wind, unwind. The rhythm that kept her anchored when Violet’s presence pressed against the inside of her skull.

Six months since the hunter retreated.

Six months of winding and unwinding.

Six months of negotiation with something inside her that wanted to be whole.

And somewhere, someone was gathering the pieces.

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