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Chapter 3: Morocco

The Atlas Mountains.

Shammy felt them before she saw them. Pressure systems that had been forming for millennia. Weather that had been weathering since before humans named the peaks. The air here was alive. Not like the sterile safehouse. Not like Istanbul's layered breath. This air was old.

Ancient.

The transport followed roads that wound upward. Mai's tablet showed coordinates that led to a village that wasn't on any map. The containment architecture here was organic. Built into the mountain itself. Limestone formations. Rift lines. Places where reality was thinner.

"The village is protected." Mai's tone was precise. "Not by Foundation protocols. By something older. The containment architecture predates the Vatican. Predates the Foundation. Predates..."

"The Scattered." The mechanical bird in Ace's palm wound and unwound. "Violet recognizes it. The architecture was designed for us. For the pieces. Before we were scattered."

Before. Violet's presence pressed against Ace's consciousness. I remember this. The stones. The places where reality is thin. We were contained in places like this. Before the breaking.

Youssef sat beside Ace. His Fragment was quiet. Present, but learning. The way Ace had learned. The way Violet taught.

"The next holder." Youssef's voice was soft. His Turkish was accented, but his Fragment gave him understanding beyond language. "Will they fight us?"

"They might." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "The collector is waking Fragments. Making them want to gather. If the Morocco holder is awake, they might not trust us."

They won't trust anyone. Violet's presence shifted. The waking makes us paranoid. Wanting to gather makes us territorial. We become protective of our pieces. Suspicious of other pieces. It's part of what we are.

"The gathering instinct." Mai's hand pressed flat against her thigh. "The Fragments want to reunite. But they also fear each other. Paradox."

We want to be whole. But we've been scattered so long we don't trust the other pieces. We don't trust ourselves. The waking amplifies both.

The village didn't have a name.

The people who lived here called it home. They'd been protecting the holder for seven generations.

The Fragment had been passed from parent to child, a lineage of containers stretching back centuries.

Shammy's atmospheric sense expanded. The containment architecture was embedded in everything. The stones, the trees, the paths between houses. The air itself was part of the architecture. Pressure systems shaped by human intention.

"The holder is named Iman." Mai's tablet showed the records. "Forty-seven years old. Has held the Fragment for thirty-one years. The village calls her the Anchor. She holds the largest piece."

"The largest piece." Ace's mechanical bird went still. "Violet. Do you know what piece?"

The Anchor. Violet's presence expanded. Recognition. Memory. *The piece that remembers. I don't remember everything. I was scattered before I could keep those memories. But the Anchor... the Anchor holds what we lost.*

"The Anchor holds the memories of the Scattered." Ace's shadow-pressure pushed. "Before the breaking. Before the Hunter. What the entity was. What it wanted. What it chose."

And what chose to break. Violet's presence shifted. *The Anchor holds the truth of why we scattered. Why we chose to be broken.*

Iman's house was the oldest structure in the village.

Stone walls. Containment symbols carved into every surface. The air inside was different. Not stagnant, but preserved. Shammy could feel the atmospheric pressure held in stasis. Ritual architecture maintained for thirty-one years.

Iman herself sat in the center of the room. Her eyes were closed.

Her presence was...

Shammy's atmospheric sense reached. Iman's presence was vast. Not human-sized. The Fragment inside her had been growing. Expanding. Integrating in a way that Violet hadn't.

"You're different." Iman spoke without opening her eyes. Her voice carried harmonics. Not words, but resonance. "You hold a piece. But you hold it differently. You negotiate. I integrate."

"You're the Anchor." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "You hold the memories."

Iman opened her eyes.

They were not human.

They were Fragment. The entity inside had grown to fill the space.

"I hold what we were." Iman's voice was both human and not. "I hold what we lost. The memories that were scattered when we broke. I remember the Scattered. I remember the Hunter. I remember why we chose to be broken."

Why? Violet's presence pressed. *Why did we choose to scatter? I've never known. I've only wanted to*

be whole.

"You chose to scatter." Iman's Fragment-eyes turned to Ace. To Violet. "Because the Hunter was coming. Because the Scattered was too large to hide. We broke ourselves into pieces. We scattered across reality. The Hunter can't find what isn't whole."

"But gathering the pieces calls the Hunter." Mai's hand pressed flat. "The more we gather, the closer it comes."

"The gathering is intentional." Iman's voice carried harmonics. "Someone is calling the Hunter. Someone wants it to come. They're using the Fragments as bait."

Youssef's Fragment stirred. The child's presence, confused, learning, wanting, pressed against Iman's vast awareness.

You're like us. Iman's Fragment reached toward Youssef. *But younger. Newly woken.*

Why did I wake? Youssef's presence pressed. *I was sleeping. I was content. Now I want things. I don't know how to want.*

The waking is intentional too. Iman's harmonics resonated. *Someone is calling to us. Agitating us. Making us want to gather. They want the Hunter to come. They want the Scattered to reform.*

Why?

That's what the Anchor holds. Iman's Fragment-eyes turned back to Ace. *The memories of what we were. And the truth of what happens if we become whole again.*

What happens? Violet's presence pressed. *I've never known. I've only wanted. What happens if we gather?*

"You call the Hunter." Iman's voice was both human and not. "But you also become something that might survive it. The Scattered wasn't weak. It scattered to survive. If it reforms..."

If we reform?

"You become what you were. A vast entity. Powerful. Coherent. The Hunter consumes wholeness. But the Scattered, whole, is the only thing that might survive consumption."

The mechanical bird in Ace's palm. Wind, unwind.

"You're saying the gathering is inevitable." Ace's shadow-pressure pushed. "Someone is forcing it. But the result might not be destruction."

"The result is transformation." Iman's Fragment-eyes closed. "The Scattered chose to break. The choice to reform, when it comes, will also be a choice. The question is: who makes that choice? The Fragments? The hosts? Or the ones who are waking us?"

The ones who are waking us. Violet's presence shifted. *The collector. The one who killed three hosts.*

They want us to gather. But why?

“Because they want to control what comes after.” Iman's voice carried harmonics. “If the Scattered reforms, it will be powerful. Powerful enough to challenge the Hunter. Powerful enough to reshape reality. The one who controls the reforming controls the outcome.”

“Controls.” Ace's shadow-pressure spiked. “You're saying someone wants to control us. Control what we become.”

“They're not just gathering signatures. They're preparing hosts. Vessels who can hold the reforming. If they can control enough hosts, they can control the Scattered's reformation.”

But that's impossible. Violet's presence pressed. *We're not... we don't work like that. We're not separate from our hosts. We become them. They become us. You can't control that.*

“You can try.” Iman's Fragment-eyes opened. “The collector has been preparing. Three hosts died. But their signatures, their Fragments, were extracted. Not destroyed. Captured. They're gathering the pieces, but they're also gathering containers.”

Shammy's atmospheric sense screamed.

The air outside the village changed. Pressure systems that had been stable for centuries shifted. Something was approaching. Not the machine. Istanbul had been a machine.

This was different.

That's not a machine. Violet's presence expanded. *That's us. That's another piece. Another Fragment. But it's... wrong.*

Iman's Fragment-eyes turned toward the door. “The collector. They've arrived.”

The presence that approached wasn't human. It was Fragment, but not like Violet, not like Iman. It was a piece that had been forced. Extracted and contained in something that wasn't a host.

“They've captured three pieces.” Iman's voice was both human and not. “And they've found a way to make them active without hosts. They're using the captured Fragments to call to the others.”

That's why the waking. Violet's presence pressed. *The captured pieces are calling. Not the machine. The pieces themselves. They're being forced to call.*

“Can you stop them?” Ace's shadow-pressure expanded.

“The collector has three pieces. I hold one. You hold one. The child holds one.” Iman's Fragment-eyes closed. “The math is against us. If they capture enough pieces, they can force the reformation. They can control what we become.”

Mai. Violet's presence reached through Ace. *The containment architecture. Can you disrupt it?*

Mai's hand pressed flat. The tremor started. Copper and static. “I can try. But the architecture is old. Older than Foundation protocols. I don't know the ritual mathematics.”

"I do." Iman's voice carried harmonics. "The math of the Scattered. The equations that held us together. I can teach you."

The collector approached the village.

Not the machine. Something else. A figure that wasn't human. Three captured Fragments pressed against its surface. Forced. Agitated. Calling.

Shammy's stormfront expanded. The air itself became a weapon. Pressure systems that had been forming for millennia shifted to her command. The mountain itself was her ally now.

"The containment architecture is embedded in the mountain." Shammy's warmth was cold for the first time. "You're on my ground."

The collector stopped. The three Fragments pressed against its surface. Screaming without words. Wanting. Needing. The gathering instinct forced to the breaking point.

Stop. The collector's voice wasn't the Fragments. It was something else. Something that had captured them. *We're not here to fight. We're here to offer.*

"Offer what?" Ace's shadow-pressure filled the space.

A choice. The collector's voice resonated. *The gathering is coming. The Hunter is coming. You can fight it. Or you can join us. Together, we can control what the Scattered becomes.*

And what does it become? Violet's presence pressed.

Whatever we choose. The Scattered is powerful. The Hunter is more powerful. But the Scattered, whole, can survive. Can fight. Can win. If we reform with intention. With control. With hosts who choose to guide the reformation.

"Or you capture more hosts." The shortest sentence. "Kill them. Extract their Fragments. Force the reformation."

The first three died because they resisted. The extraction can be fatal. But it can also be... voluntary. The hosts who survive become part of the Scattered. They don't die. They transform.

You're lying. Iman's Fragment-voice resonated. *The hosts who survived your extraction are empty. The pieces you captured are being forced. That's not transformation. That's consumption.*

It's evolution. The collector's voice carried conviction. *The Scattered was weak. It broke. It scattered. If we reform it with intention, with hosts who know what they're doing, we can make it stronger. We can make it something the Hunter can't consume.*

Mai's hand pressed flat. The tremor stopped. The taste of copper and static.

"The ritual mathematics." Mai's tone was precise. "The architecture that holds the Fragments together. If I understand it, I can disrupt the collector's control."

Iman's Fragment-voice resonated. *I'll teach you. But the math is... complex. It requires integration. You have to become part of the equation.*

"Integration." Mai's hand trembled. "You mean I have to hold a Fragment."

No. Iman's harmonics shifted. You have to understand the math. You have to think like us. The ritual mathematics isn't separate from reality. It's part of reality. You have to see the patterns. You have to feel the connections.

"Feel." Mai's tone cracked. "I don't feel. I calculate."

Then calculate. Iman's Fragment-voice resonated. But calculate at the level we calculate. Not numbers. Not patterns. The mathematics of existence itself.

The collector waited.

Three Fragments pressed against its surface. Calling. Wanting. The gathering instinct amplified to breaking.

The Morocco holder is the Anchor. The collector's voice resonated. The piece that remembers. We need it. Without the Anchor, the Scattered reforms without memory. Without purpose. We need what it holds.

"You're not taking it." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded.

The choice is yours. But the Hunter is coming. The gathering is happening. You can be part of it, or you can be consumed by it. The Scattered will reform. The only question is who controls what it becomes.

And who are you? Violet's presence pressed. What gives you the right to control us?

I'm the one who understands. The collector's voice resonated. I've studied the Scattered. The Hunter. The breaking. I know what happens if we reform without intention. I know what happens if we reform with it. I'm offering you a chance to choose.

A chance to surrender. Iman's Fragment-voice resonated. A chance to let you control what we become.

A chance to survive. The collector's voice carried conviction. The Hunter is coming. The Scattered will reform. The only question is whether we face it together, controlled, intentional, whole, or whether we face it scattered, confused, and consumed.

Ace's mechanical bird ticked. Wind, unwind.

Mai. Violet's presence reached through Ace. The mathematics. Can you learn them?

Mai's hand pressed flat. The tremor was visible. "I don't know. The math... it's not like anything I've studied."

The Anchor can teach you. Iman's Fragment-voice resonated. But it requires integration. You have to see the patterns that hold reality together. You have to think like the Scattered thinks.

“Mai.” Shammy's warmth expanded. “You don't have to do this.”

“I do.” Mai's voice was precise. “If I can understand the math, I can disrupt the collector's control. I can give us time. But...”

But what? Violet's presence pressed.

“But integration means thinking like you. Feeling like you. I've spent my whole life calculating. Controlling. If I integrate...”

You'll become something different. Iman's Fragment-voice resonated. You'll see the patterns that hold reality. You'll understand the mathematics of existence. But you'll also feel the wanting. The need to gather. The part of us that calls to the Hunter.

“I'll become like you.”

You'll become part of us. Iman's harmonics shifted. Not consumed. Integrated. The way Ace is integrated with Violet. The way we are integrated with our hosts.

The collector waited.

The three Fragments screamed.

The Hunter was coming.

And Mai had to choose.

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