

Chapter 5: The Bell Tones

The Vatican bells rang at the wrong time.

Not the Angelus. Shammy knew that rhythm by heart. Six AM, noon, six PM. The prayers that marked the hours, calls to worship echoing through Rome for centuries. She'd felt the bells in Prague, in Tokyo, in a dozen cities where the rhythm of prayer marked time differently. But Rome was different. Rome had been ringing bells since before the concept of time zones existed. The atmosphere here was older. Heavier. Saturated with intention.

Shammy felt it first. Not sound. Pressure. The atmospheric shift that preceded the Angelus by exactly four minutes and seventeen seconds, every evening, since the current schedule was established in 1962. She'd felt it dozens of times since arriving. The way the air prepared itself. The way pressure systems aligned. The way the atmosphere itself seemed to inhale before the first peal.

But this wasn't four minutes early. This was the wrong hour entirely.

9:47 PM. The bells should have been silent. And the delay carried information that had nothing to do with prayer.

The pressure built. Not from weather.

From intention.

Someone was using the bells to speak.

"Ace." Shammy's hair lifted, storm-gradient responding to the pressure change, silver-white strands rising in currents that had nothing to do with wind. "The bells. They're not ringing for prayer."

Ace stood at the window overlooking St. Peter's Square. Shadow-pressure contracted around her, making the room feel smaller. The mechanical bird in her pocket was ticking. The tiny clockwork sparrow she'd found in a market in Prague, wound and unwound, wound and unwound. Tension and release.

"Coordinates." Mai's tablet illuminated the dim room, mathematical patterns scrolling across the screen. Her fingers traced the timing intervals between peals, her mind solving a problem her body hadn't yet processed. "The intervals aren't liturgical. They're numerical. Nine peals, then seven, then four, then seven again. Not random. Deliberate. The thief is calling us."

"Can you decode it?"

"Already decoded." Precise. "The pattern resolves to latitude and longitude. But there's a second layer. A timing pattern. The intervals between the peals are milliseconds apart. The message doesn't just say where. It says when. After dark. Tonight."

Shammy moved to the window, feeling the air currents that moved through the square below. The atmosphere carried residue. Intention. Direction. Distance. "Someone wants us to find them. The

pressure pattern leads..." She turned, orienting herself, storm-gradient responding to atmospheric currents. "The Vatican Gardens. Near the fountain of the eagle. The air remembers being moved there. Pressure differentials that shouldn't exist."

"The meeting place from the outline." Ace's voice was flat. The bird ticked faster in her pocket. "Or an ambush."

"Both." Shammy's warmth had evaporated. She didn't joke in the presence of this kind of pressure. The atmospheric weight of something old, something patient, something that had been waiting. "They're not trying to hide from us. They want us to come."

Mai's tablet showed the pattern resolving into coordinates. "The mathematical precision suggests someone who understands ritual architecture. The bells aren't just covering. They're directing. Someone who knows how the Vatican's symbolic systems work."

"Someone who's been here before." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded, filling the corners of the room. "Or someone who was made here."

The mechanical bird ticked. Wound too tight. Ace's fingers found its wings without conscious thought, the familiar motion of checking the mechanism, verifying the tension, grounding herself in something small and controllable while everything else spiraled. The spring pressed against her thumb. Brass and copper, worn smooth from years of handling. The only thing she owned that served no operational purpose. The only thing she did that had no tactical value.

In a world of katanas and shadow-pressure and Fragment entities, the clockwork sparrow was hers. Just hers.

The Vatican Gardens at night were a different world.

By day, formal, structured. The geometric precision of Renaissance landscaping, the deliberate placement of cypress and ilex, the careful ordering of fountains and statues. But by night, something else. Shammy had felt it the moment they passed through the gate. The atmosphere shifted. The air changed. What had been controlled became wild. What had been ordered became ancient.

Shammy could feel the atmospheric layers like strata of sediment. Warmth radiating from stone that had absorbed the day's sun. Cool shadows pooling under cypress and ilex. Air currents threading through hedges that had stood for centuries. The gardens were old. Older than the buildings that surrounded them. Older than the Church that maintained them. The air remembered. Every tree grown through seasons of prayer. Every stone touched by believing hands. The atmosphere was thick with intention, layered, compressed, ancient. It pressed against her storm-gradient, not with resistance but with weight.

As if the air itself had been praying for so long it had forgotten how to do anything else.

And something had moved through it recently. Something that didn't belong.

"The pressure differential is wrong." Shammy's voice had lost its warmth entirely. Her playfulness had evaporated the moment they entered the gardens, replaced by an intensity that made Mai's analytical focus look casual. "Someone's been manipulating the atmosphere. The air currents don't flow naturally here. They've been... redirected. Not controlled. Displaced. Like something moved through and the air couldn't remember how to flow back."

"You feel that clearly?" Mai asked, tablet casting pale light on the path ahead.

"I feel everything clearly in open air." Shammy's hair lifted slightly, responding to currents that weren't there. "What I'm feeling is wrongness. A gap in the pressure system. A hole where atmosphere should be. Like looking at a face and seeing a missing feature. Not hidden. Just absent."

Mai walked beside her, fingers tracing rune-structures on the device's surface. "The coordinates converge on the fountain of the eagle. Roman-era construction, predates most of the Vatican structures. The thief chose a neutral space. Neutral in the sense that no modern surveillance covers it effectively. But there's a secondary factor. The fountain sits at an intersection of old containment lines. The Vatican built their gardens over something older."

"A containment grid?"

"More like a neutralizing field. The intersection would suppress most anomalous activity. Whatever we're meeting, they chose a place where they'd be weaker." Analytical. "That suggests either confidence or desperation."

Ace walked ahead, shadow-pressure expanded. The void-weight made the garden paths feel compressed, shorter, as if space itself was folding around her. Her katanas hummed at a frequency below hearing. Not a sound but a pressure in the air, a weight that pressed against the eardrums without crossing them. The blades were ready. Her shadow-pressure filled the spaces between the hedges, making the darkness itself feel occupied.

The mechanical bird ticked in her pocket.

"Movement." Barely a whisper. "Ahead. Not walking. Shifting."

Shammy felt it too. A gap in the atmosphere. A place where air refused to exist, where pressure differentials collapsed into nothing. Something was waiting by the fountain.

Something that didn't breathe.

The fountain of the eagle emerged from the darkness. An ancient stone eagle, wings spread, water flowing from its beak into a circular basin. Moonlight caught the spray, fracturing into silver. The atmosphere was still. Not calm. Waiting. Holding its breath.

And in the center of the clearing, the thief was waiting.

Not solid. Not entirely.

Shammy's atmospheric sense screamed wrong-wrong-wrong. The presence was a void where air should be, a gap in the pressure system, a hole in the atmosphere that shouldn't exist. It wasn't like anything she'd felt before. Not like the anomaly in Prague. Not like the containment breach in Tokyo. Not like the sterile environment of the Vatican archives. Those had been presences. Things that pushed against her storm-gradient, that displaced atmosphere, that made themselves known through pressure and weight.

This was an absence.

A space where reality had been scooped out and something else poured in. Not darkness. Darkness

was still something. Not shadow. Even shadow had weight, had presence, had edges. This was nothing. A void that hurt to perceive, that made her atmospheric sense recoil like touching a live wire.

But there was shape. Human-shaped. Mostly. Eyes that caught the moonlight and reflected nothing back, not because they absorbed light but because there was nothing there to reflect. The figure stood at the center of the clearing like a hole cut into the fabric of the night.

Shammy didn't make jokes. Her warmth had evaporated the moment she felt the presence's atmosphere. Nothing funny about this. Nothing warm. Nothing human. The air around the figure was so still it hurt to breathe, not because it was thick but because it wasn't there. The presence had replaced atmosphere with something else. Something that made Shammy's storm-gradient recoil.

The mechanical bird ticked faster. Ace's fingers found its wings.

"You came." The voice pressed into the air. Pressure made sound, the same way Shammy's stormfront worked but inverted. Where she controlled atmosphere, this presence created absence. The same way the anomaly in Prague had spoken. The same way the message in the cell had been delivered. But older. Heavier. Carrying the weight of centuries of being something that shouldn't exist. The words didn't come from the figure's mouth. There was no mouth, not really. They came from the space around it, from the void where air should have been, from the gap in reality that this presence had carved into the world.

Ace's katanas hummed louder. The frequency dropped lower. Not into hearing, but into feeling. The blades recognized something wrong. They'd been forged to cut things that shouldn't exist.

Things like this.

"I needed to see you." The presence shifted. Not walking. Moving through pressure differentials, sliding from one location to another without crossing the space between. The motion was wrong. Not in the way that supernatural motion was wrong. In the way that physics itself had been rewritten around this entity. Where it moved, space compressed. Where it stopped, space expanded. Reality making room for something that shouldn't fit. "To show you what you're carrying. To explain what you don't understand."

"I know what I'm carrying." Ace's voice was flat. Four words. Not defensive. Informative. The Fragment inside her was stirring, pushing against the boundaries of her consciousness, responding to something in the presence that recognized and was recognized. "Violet. A Fragment. Bound inside me. The Codex Umbra showed me that much."

The presence shifted. The air compressed around it as it took a step closer. And in that step, something changed. The form stabilized. Became more solid. More present. As if it was trying to be seen. As if it wanted to be recognized. The figure that emerged from the void was human-shaped. Roughly. The edges were still indistinct, folding in on themselves, like paper trying to remember what it was before it was crumpled.

And Ace felt Violet stir.

Pressure behind her eyes. Not pain. Presence. The Fragment was responding to something. The mechanical bird in her pocket ticked faster. Wound too tight. Ace's fingers found its wings, but the familiar motion couldn't ground her this time. Violet was pushing. Responding. Recognizing.

You. The word pressed into Ace's consciousness. Not her thought, not her voice. Violet. The Fragment surfacing enough to speak. Enough to recognize. *I know that presence. I know what it is. I know what*

it was before.

"Not bound." The presence shifted again, atmosphere compressing and releasing around it.

"Integrated. There's a difference. The Codex Umbra shows what haunts you. It doesn't explain what you are."

"Then explain."

The presence expanded. Not attacking. Demonstrating. The atmosphere around the clearing compressed, released, compressed again. Pressure waves that moved through air the way Shammy's stormfront did, but inverted. Creating absence instead of presence.

"I am not carrying a Fragment." Centuries of weight in the voice. "I am the Fragment. The entity and I are one. Integrated so deeply that the vessel and the Fragment are indistinguishable. Four hundred and thirty-seven years of integration."

Shammy's atmospheric sense reached out. The presence was telling the truth. Or at least a version of it. No separation. No boundary between host and entity. Just one being. One presence that had been becoming itself for nearly half a millennium.

"That's deep integration." Mai's voice was analytical, but her hand had moved to her disruptor pistol. The tracing pattern on the barrel was a grounding ritual. "That takes centuries of synchronization. Most Fragment hosts don't survive the first decade."

"I was made to survive." The presence shifted. "I was bound to an entity that controls atmosphere. The same way your storm-elemental does, but from the other direction. I create absence. My entity creates absence. We became one absence together."

The mechanical bird in Ace's pocket was ticking so fast it felt like a heartbeat. Wound too tight. She unwound it slightly, the motion unconscious.

"Violet." Ace's shadow-pressure fluctuated. "The Fragment inside me. She's not integrated like that."

"Not yet." No judgment in the presence's voice. Just observation, the kind that came from centuries of watching. "You've been carrying her for years. Decades. But you're not one. You're still two. Vessel and Fragment. Separate. The integration hasn't begun."

"Why tell me this?"

"Because I know what Violet is." The presence moved closer. Not walking. The atmosphere folding around it. "I know what she was before she was scattered. I know what she wants. I know what she's afraid of."

"What does she want?"

"Reunion." The presence shifted. "All Fragments want reunion. They were one entity. One being. Something broke them apart. Scattered them across hosts, across centuries, across continents. And they want to come back together. They want to be whole again."

Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. The mechanical bird in her pocket ticked. Unwound. Tick. Wound again.

"The Blood-Moon Event." Flat. "The ritual that destroyed my village."

"An attempt to bring Fragments together." Heavy. "To reunite scattered pieces. But the ritual was interrupted. The Fragment hosts were killed. Most of them."

"You survived."

"I was already integrated. The ritual couldn't unmake me. It could only scatter the unbound pieces. The pieces that hadn't become one with their vessels." The presence shifted. "Violet was one of them. She was bound to a host. The host was killed. Violet was scattered. She found you."

"Found me."

"Chose you." Four hundred years of watching Fragment hosts live and die and integrate or fail. "Fragments choose their vessels. Violet saw you in the aftermath of the Blood-Moon. A survivor. Strong enough to hold her. Traumatized enough to let her in without fighting. She chose you. She saved you from what would have killed everyone else."

The mechanical bird ticked faster. Ace's shadow-pressure fluctuated. Violet was responding. Stirring inside her, pushing against the boundaries.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you need to know what you're carrying." The presence shifted. "Violet wants reunion. She wants to be whole again. She wants to find the other pieces. The other scattered fragments of what she was. And if she finds them, if she reintegrates, she might not need you anymore."

"What happens to me?"

"I don't know." Brutally honest. The honesty of someone who had stopped softening truth centuries ago. "I was integrated before the scattering. I've been one entity for four centuries. I don't remember being separate. But you. You're still two. If Violet reintegrates, she might release you. Or she might consume you. Or you might become one, like me. Or you might die. The outcome depends on factors I cannot predict."

"Or I might die." Not a question.

"That too." The presence didn't soften it. "But I didn't call you here to tell you about Violet. I called you here because something is coming."

The atmosphere around the clearing shifted. The presence expanded, creating a space that felt like a room. Private. Contained. Isolated from the rest of the gardens. The air itself stopped moving.

"I have something to offer. A bargain."

Ace's katanas hummed louder. "I don't make bargains with things I don't understand."

"You will." The presence shifted. "I need something you have. Something only you can give."

"What?"

"Your memories of the Blood-Moon Event." Careful. Measured. The way someone speaks when they're trying not to trigger a defensive reaction. "I need to know how you survived. What Violet did. How she bound herself to you. The ritual scattered me, but it bound her. I need to understand how."

"Why?"

"Because the hunter is coming." The presence's atmosphere compressed. Sudden. Sharp. Carrying fear. "The thing that hunts Fragment hosts. The thing that made the Blood-Moon Event. It's tracking us. All of us. It wants to consume the scattered pieces. If I understand how Violet bound to you, how she survived, maybe I can protect myself. Maybe I can stop running."

"Or maybe you want to bind yourself more deeply." Mai's voice was analytical, but her hand stayed on her disruptor. "Use the information to enhance your integration. Become more than you already are."

"I have no need for enhancement." The presence shifted. "I am already one. What would I become? I need to survive. The hunter is coming for all Fragment hosts. I've been running for four centuries."

Tired.

"I'm tired of running."

Shammy's atmospheric sense was reading the presence. The void in atmosphere. The weight of centuries. Her warmth had evaporated entirely. "They're telling the truth. About wanting to survive. About being tired of running." She paused. Tight. "But they're also holding something back."

"Everyone holds something back." The presence shifted. "I'm offering a trade. Your memories. The ones you can't access, the ones Violet carries. In exchange for what I know about Fragments. About Violet. About the hunter. About what's coming for all of us."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I keep destroying the records of Fragment creation." The presence's atmosphere expanded. "I keep burning the knowledge that made us. And I face the hunter alone. But you'll face it too. Without knowing what you're carrying. Without understanding what Violet is. Without knowing what's hunting you."

Ace's shadow-pressure was fluctuating. Violet was responding. Stirring inside her, pushing against the boundaries. The mechanical bird ticked faster. Tick. Tick. Tick.

"Violet." Flat. Not to the presence. To the Fragment. To the thing inside her. "What do you want?"

The Fragment didn't answer in words. It answered in pressure. A feeling. A sense. A weight that pressed against Ace's consciousness. The mechanical bird in Ace's pocket ticked faster. Tick. Tick. Tick. Like a heartbeat. Like a countdown.

He's telling the truth, Violet pressed into Ace's consciousness. Pressure in a wound. Not painful, but impossible to ignore. *About what I am. About what I want. About the hunter.*

Do you want reunion?

The question hung between them. Not just words but intention. Ace felt Violet consider it. Weigh it. The Fragment wasn't simple. It was a piece of something that had been whole once. Something that remembered being complete.

I want to be whole again. The pressure intensified. *I want to stop being scattered. I want to stop being afraid. I want to stop feeling like a piece of something that should be one. I want to stop feeling the edges of myself. Where I end and where the nothing begins.*

And what happens to me?

That's what we need to find out. The pressure released slightly. Violet wasn't pushing anymore. She was waiting. *Together.*

You're not going to tell me?

I don't know. The Fragment's presence shifted. Not evasive. Uncertain. *I've never been whole. I don't know what happens when pieces reunite. I don't know if I would consume you. Release you. Become one with you. The presence. The one who's integrated. He doesn't know either. He's been one for so long he can't remember being separate.*

But you want reunion anyway.

Yes. The pressure changed. Grief. Longing. Fear. All mixed together. *Because being scattered is worse. Because being afraid is worse. Because being alone is worse. Even if I don't know what happens when I'm whole. At least I'll know what I am.*

Ace looked at the presence. The void in atmosphere. The Fragment host who had been one entity for four centuries. The thing that had survived by becoming what it carried.

"I'll think about it." Flat. "But I won't give you my memories. Not yet. Not until I understand what they are."

"Then take this." The presence shifted, and something fell to the ground. A page, torn from a manuscript, landing on the grass between them. "The Codex Umbra. I stole it. I've read it. It shows you what haunts you. Read it. See what Violet carries. Then decide."

The presence began to fade. The atmosphere returned to normal. Air flowing, pressure equalizing, the void filling. The clearing was empty except for the triad and a piece of paper on the ground.

But Shammy felt it before it was gone. Not the presence itself. The intention. The weight of centuries of running. The exhaustion of being something that shouldn't exist for four hundred years. The desperate hope that someone else might understand.

The presence wasn't just warning them.

It was asking for something it couldn't name.

The bells rang again. This time in the correct liturgical pattern, the Angelus finally arriving at its proper hour. The signal had ended. The invitation remained.

Ace picked up the page. The Codex Umbra. A manuscript that showed readers what haunted them.

"Shammy." Flat. "The atmosphere. Did you feel that?"

"The void." Shammy's hair settled, storm-gradient calming. The warmth was starting to return. Slowly. Like sunrise after a long night. "They're gone. But they left something behind. Not just the page."

"What?"

"A warning." Still tight. "The atmosphere carries their intention. They're not lying about the hunter. They're not lying about being tired of running. But they're also not telling us everything. There's

something else. Something they want besides survival.”

“They're holding something back.” Mai's tablet showed the mathematical pattern of the bells fading. “They want Ace's memories. But for what purpose, they're not saying.”

“For survival.” Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. The mechanical bird ticked. “Or for binding. Or for something else entirely. We don't have enough information.”

She looked at the page in her hand. The Codex Umbra. A manuscript that showed what haunted you.

“We need to read this.” Flat. “See what Violet carries. See what I'm carrying.”

“And then?” Shammy asked. Her warmth was returning, but her voice still carried the weight of what she'd felt.

“Then we decide whether to make the bargain.” Ace's mechanical bird was still ticking fast. She unwound it. Wound it again. Tension and release. “Or whether to find another way to face what's coming.”

The triad walked out of the gardens. Depth, Horizontal, Vertical. Three vectors. Three directions. Three people carrying things they didn't fully understand. The paths that had felt compressed on the way in now felt endless. Each step carrying them away from the presence, away from the clearing, away from the weight of what had been offered.

But the presence had been right about one thing.

The hunter was coming. For all of them.

And they needed to know what they were carrying before it arrived.

The mechanical bird ticked in Ace's pocket. Wound too tight. The spring was straining. She unwound it slowly, letting the tension release. But she didn't stop winding it altogether.

Some tension was necessary. Some pressure kept you moving.

The trick was knowing when to hold on.

And when to let go.

Shammy walked beside her, warmth slowly returning. The presence's wrongness had faded, leaving her storm-gradient settled, her humor cautiously reemerging. But she didn't joke yet. The atmosphere still carried residue. Intention. Warning. The weight of centuries of running.

Mai walked on Ace's other side, tablet dark now, fingers still tracing patterns on the surface. The ritual architecture of the encounter would stay with her. Equations that wouldn't solve, variables that refused to resolve. The presence had offered information in exchange for something that couldn't be quantified. Memory. Trauma. The thing that made Ace who she was.

And Violet.

Violet, who wanted reunion. Violet, who was afraid. Violet, who had been scattered and wanted to be whole.

Violet, who didn't know what would happen to Ace if she got what she wanted.

The mechanical bird ticked. She wound it again. Unwound it. The ritual of tension and release. The only control she had in a situation where everything else was uncertain.

The hunter was coming.

But first, the Codex Umbra.

First, they needed to see what haunted them.

[← Chapter 4](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 6 →](#)—

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Last update: **23/04/2026 16:20**

