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## Chapter 6: The Bargain

The page from the Codex Umbra sat on the table in the safehouse. Old paper. Older ink. The text crawled when Ace wasn't looking directly at it.

Not crawled. Moved. The letters shifted, rearranged, reformed. Not randomly. With intention. The manuscript was reading her as much as she was reading it. Every time she glanced away and looked back, the text had changed. New words. New meanings. New interpretations of the same fundamental truth.

Guilt. The Codex showed you your guilt. That was its purpose. That was its power.

Mai traced patterns on her disruptor pistol. Not charging. Just the tactile grounding of shapes she knew. The metal was cool. Familiar. The runes caught lamplight in ways that standard physics didn't explain. Circle. Circle. Interlock. The same three shapes her fingers had traced since Tokyo. Before Tokyo. The pattern that meant nothing and everything.

"The thief wants your memories." She didn't look at Ace. "That's the bargain."

Ace stood by the window. Shadow-pressure contracted around her. The room felt smaller when she was in it. Smaller still when she was holding something inside.

"Yes."

"And they're offering information about Violet. About Fragments. About the hunter." Mai's fingers traced the same pattern. Three circles. Interlocking. The rhythm of calculation. "The equation isn't balanced."

Shammy sat on the couch, legs folded beneath her. The safehouse was climate-controlled. Sterile. Her atmospheric sense had flattened the moment they entered. She could still feel the air, but it was harder here. Thicker. Like breathing through wool. The pressure systems outside couldn't reach her. The wind that had traveled three days from the Mediterranean was locked outside.

"Maybe it's not about balance." Quieter than usual. The warmth had thinned. "Maybe it's about what Ace needs."

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The argument had started in the garden. Continued in the car. Now it filled the safehouse like static.

Mai's position was tactical. "The thief survived a Fragment release. That information is valuable. If we can learn how they did it..."

"We don't know if they're telling the truth." Shammy's hair lifted slightly. Even in the sterile air, she reached for atmosphere. "We don't know what they actually want."

"We know they're destroying records." Mai's pattern-tracing intensified. Circle. Circle. Interlock. "The

Vatican's records. The Silence Protocol. The Fragment Catalogue. They're not collecting. They're burning."

"Which means they have something to hide." Warm but the edges were sharp. "Or something to protect."

"Or both."

Ace stood by the window. The clockwork sparrow in her pocket. Wind, unwind. The familiar motion kept her anchored while the spring inside coiled tighter.

She hadn't spoken since they'd entered the safehouse.

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Thread A: Ace, alone with the Codex page.

The text moved when she wasn't watching. Not letters. Shapes. Pressures. The kind of meaning that Violet understood better than she did. The kind that bypassed language and went directly into the weight behind her eyes.

*Show me*, she thought. Not to the page. To the Fragment inside her. *Show me what you carry*.

Violet responded in pressure. A feeling. A sense. The page was a key. Not to memories. To wounds. The Codex Umbra showed readers what haunted them. For Ace, that meant the Blood-Moon. The village. The night everything burned.

She didn't want to see it.

But she needed to.

---

The Fragment Catalogue entries were hidden in the Codex. Not separate. A layer underneath. Mai had found the pattern, the way the ink rearranged itself for each reader. For her, the Codex showed equations. For Shammy, it showed weather. For Ace...

Fire.

She touched the page. The ink crawled toward her fingers like it was alive. Like it recognized her. The tiny mechanism ticked in her pocket. Steady. Grounding. The rhythm of holding on.

### **Entry 247: FRAGMENT DESIGNATION VIOLET**

*Entity Classification: Bound. Status: Active. Host: Designated Silent Vessel. Integration: 94% stable.*

The text rearranged itself as she read. Adapting. Showing her what she needed to see.

**Origin: Blood-Moon Event, 14 years prior. Location: [REDACTED]. The entity was summoned during a mass binding ritual. The ritual failed. Violet scattered during the collapse. One fragment bound to the designated Silent Vessel. Remaining fragments: location unknown.**

*Designated Silent Vessel. Not accidental host. Not survivor.* The words were deliberate. Clinical.

Vatican precision.

**Silent Vessel Protocol: The host was selected prior to the binding. The selection criteria are documented in Volume VII. The host's memories of the selection process were removed during integration to prevent rejection cascades.**

Ace's shadow-pressure contracted.

Selected. Not saved. Chosen.

**Memory Integration Status: Partial. The host carries surface memories. The entity carries suppressed memories. The removed memories persist in fragment form within the entity's resonance field. They are accessible only through deep integration or external extraction.**

The thief wanted the memories she couldn't access. The ones Violet held. The ones that explained why she'd been chosen.

**WARNING: Memory extraction without proper stabilization may result in host rejection cascade. The Silent Vessel is designed to hold. Removal of contained elements through non-sanctioned methods voids the containment warranty.**

*Containment warranty.*

Like she was a device. A product. A vessel designed by priests four centuries ago.

She kept reading.

**The entity designated Violet is one of seven fragments comprising a larger construct. The construct was shattered during the Binding Wars. Reassembly is theoretically possible but prohibited under Vatican Canon. See: Silence Protocol, Section 47.**

Seven fragments. Violet was one. The burning fragment from the monastery was another. Five more.

**Fragment Reassembly Warning: The construct was shattered for containment purposes. The original entity demonstrated behaviors incompatible with sustained human civilization. The fragments were designed to integrate with human hosts specifically to prevent reassembly. Each fragment develops loyalty to its host over time. This is a feature, not a bug.**

Violet was loyal to her. Not because of accident. Because of design. The priests who made the Silent Vessels had built in a safeguard. Fragment hosts would protect their fragments. The fragments would protect their hosts.

Someone had thought of everything.

Except how to tell the hosts they'd been designed.

---

Her hand touched the paper. Cold. The ink crawled toward her fingers. The catalogue entries faded, replaced by something older. The Codex Umbra itself. The weapon beneath the archive.

The vision came in pressure. Not images. Weight. The weight of fire and memory and things that

couldn't be spoken.

*Show me the village, she thought. Show me what happened.*

The Codex responded.

---

She was outside. Not her body. A perspective. Watching from a distance as smoke rose from the place that had been her home.

The Blood-Moon hung overhead. Not red. Violet. The color of her Fragment. The color of the ritual that had destroyed everything.

She saw herself. Small. Running through streets that burned. Bodies that had been people. The fire moved wrong. It didn't spread, it *selected*. Taking some buildings. Ignoring others. Following a pattern she couldn't see.

*Selection criteria.* The catalogue's words echoed. *The host was selected prior to the binding.*

Her younger self ran. Toward the temple. Toward the center of town. She was following someone...

No.

She was being called.

A voice in her head. Not Violet. Something older. Something that had been waiting. It said words she couldn't hear now, words in a language she'd never learned. But she'd understood them then. She'd known exactly where to go.

The vision showed her running into the temple. The priests were there. Not performing the ritual. *Preparing her.* Washing her hands. Painting symbols on her forehead. Telling her she was special. Chosen.

*You will hold something precious.*

*You will survive when others don't.*

*You will serve.*

She hadn't understood. She was a child. But she'd felt the weight of their words. The importance. She'd felt chosen.

The ritual started. The Blood-Moon rose. The entity came down.

And she'd held it. Violet. The fragment that chose her because she'd been prepared. Because she'd been designed.

*Why don't I remember this?*

The vision shifted. Showed her the moment the memories were taken. Not by the ritual. By the priests. After. When she was still holding Violet, still burning from the inside, still not understanding why everyone else was dead.

One of the priests touched her forehead. Said words. The memories went dark.

*For your protection, he said. And for ours.*

Then Dr. Bright's team had found her. Alone. No memories. A village of corpses and one small girl who didn't remember why she'd survived.

The Codex released her.

---

Ace stood by the table. Shaking. Not visibly. Her shadow-pressure held her steady. But inside, the tremors moved through her like aftershocks.

*Selected. Not saved. Designed.*

The priests had prepared her. They'd chosen her before the Blood-Moon. They'd made her into a container and then they'd taken the memory of being made.

The thief knew this. The thief had shown her the Codex page specifically. To tell her: *I know what you are. I know what they made you.*

And then the thief had asked for her memories. The memories the priests had removed. The memories that would tell her why.

The Codex page lay on the table. The text had stopped moving. Whatever it had shown her was finished.

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Thread B: Mai and Shammy in the briefing room.

"You're advocating for giving a stranger access to Ace's trauma." Flat. "That's not tactical. That's not even careful. That's..."

"That's potentially the only way to learn what Violet is." Mai's voice remained analytical. Her fingers traced circle-circle-interlock on her pistol. "The thief knows something. Four centuries of integration. They understand Fragments in ways we don't."

"At what cost?"

"The cost of knowledge." Mai finally looked up from her pistol. "Ace's memories of the Blood-Moon are incomplete. Violet holds them. If the thief can access them. If we can learn how Violet bound to Ace. We might be able to help her. We might be able to calculate a release."

Shammy stood. Her hair lifted. The air responding to her emotional state despite the sterile room. "You're not thinking about Ace. You're thinking about the equation."

"I'm always thinking about the equation."

"That's the problem." Edges now. Sharp ones. "The equation doesn't have feelings. Ace does. The equation doesn't wake up from nightmares about fire. Ace does. The equation doesn't hold a Fragment that talks to her in the dark. Ace does."

"I know what Ace holds." Mai's pattern-tracing continued. Circle. Circle. Interlock. "I'm trying to help her hold it."

"By giving away pieces of her?"

"By understanding what she's holding. There's a difference."

Shammy moved toward the window. The sterile air pushed back against her stormfront. She could feel the pressure systems outside, the Mediterranean wind that had been traveling for days. But in here, in the climate-controlled safehouse, she was diminished. Her atmospheric sense flattened. Her connection to the weather that was her birthright. Thin.

"You didn't see her face when the thief made the offer." Quieter. "The way she went still. Not combat-still. Something else."

"I saw."

"And you still want to trade her memories for data."

"I want to give her a choice." Analytical. But her fingers had stopped tracing. "The data might show us how to release Violet. It might show us what she's carrying. The cost is high. But the cost of not knowing might be higher."

"You're treating her memories like variables."

"I'm treating them like information. Information that might save her."

Shammy turned from the window. Her hair settled. The atmospheric pressure in the room shifted. Warmer, despite the sterile air. Her warmth returning through sheer force of will.

"What if it doesn't save her? What if the thief uses those memories to control her? To control Violet? We don't know what they are. We don't know what they want. We know they're burning records. We know they survived four centuries with a Fragment. We know nothing about their agenda."

"We know they left us a weapon." Mai touched the Codex page. "They gave us information. Without asking for anything in return."

"They gave us a test." Warm. Certain. "They showed us what they could offer. The Fragment Catalogue. The hidden text. They're making a case for themselves. Building trust before they ask for what they really want."

"Which is?"

"Ace's memories. The ones she doesn't have access to. The ones that tell her why she was chosen." Shammy's atmospheric pressure shifted. "The thief wants something. And they're willing to trade for it. That means it's valuable. That means we shouldn't give it away."

"Or it means they have information we need, and they're offering a fair exchange." Analytical. "The equation has two sides. We can't solve it with only one."

---

The threads converged at the table.

Ace walked back into the room. The Codex page in her hand. The text had stopped moving. Whatever it had shown her was finished.

"I read it." Flat.

Mai turned. "What did it show?"

"My village. The Blood-Moon." Ace's shadow-pressure fluctuated. "The night Violet chose me."

Shammy reached out. Atmospheric warmth. "Little shadow..."

"I'm not making the bargain."

Simple. Final.

Mai's pattern stopped. "Ace..."

"I'm not giving a stranger access to my head." Ace's eyes were violet in the lamplight. Prismatic. "If they want my memories, they'll have to take them. I'm not handing them over."

Shammy's warmth returned. Full. Genuine. The air in the room shifted. Less sterile. More breathable. "Good."

"You're refusing?" Analytical. "Based on what data?"

"Based on trust." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "I don't trust them. I don't know what they are. I don't know what they want. But I know they've been burning records. Not collecting. Burning. Destroying knowledge about Fragments. About Silent Vessels."

She placed the Codex page on the table.

"They showed me the page to show me what they know. They wanted me to understand that they understand." Flat. "But they also wanted me to see what Violet carries. What I carry."

"And?" Mai's pattern-tracing resumed.

"The Blood-Moon wasn't random." The clockwork sparrow ticked steadily. "The village was chosen. The ritual was summoned. Violet was bound to me because something made her bind to me."

"The thief said that." Warm. "They said Violet chose you."

"Chose me. Not randomly." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "The Blood-Moon was trying to bring Fragments together. To reassemble something. Violet scattered during the ritual. But she found me. She chose me. Because I was there."

"Why were you there?" Softer.

"I don't remember." Flat. "That's what the thief wants. The memories I don't have. The part Violet is holding."

"And you're not giving them up." Shammy's warmth settled. "Good. They're not yours to give. They're yours to take back. When you're ready."

Ace looked at her. The warrior-sister bond. Shammy had read the atmospheric pressure of the

decision before Ace had made it.

---

The Codex page lay on the table. Mai picked it up.

“Show me.”

The ink crawled. The text rewrote itself. Mai's eyes moved across patterns that weren't words. Pressures, shapes, meanings that bypassed language and went directly to understanding.

Her face went pale.

“Mai?” Warm. Concerned.

“The Tokyo breach.” Strained. “My calculation. The equation I should have seen. The pattern that would have saved them.”

She set the page down.

“It shows you what haunts you.” Analytical. “What you doubt. The question underneath the wound.”

“What question?” Flat.

“Did I choose wrong.” Mai's pattern-tracing intensified. Circle. Circle. Interlock. “Did I miss the pattern because I'm not good enough. Or because the pattern wasn't there.”

“Was it there?”

Mai's hand trembled. Just slightly. “Yes. The Codex showed me. It was always there.”

The vision pressed into her. Tokyo. The breach. The containment field failing. Her colleagues running for the extraction point while she calculated the reinforcement pattern. The numbers had been wrong. She'd known they were wrong. She'd adjusted. Adjusted again.

The pattern had been there. A hairline fracture in the containment architecture. She'd seen it. She'd dismissed it as a stress artifact. A shadow, not a crack.

The Codex showed her the moment. The exact moment when she'd looked at the fracture and decided it wasn't the problem. The exact moment when she'd chosen to focus on the breach point instead of the structural weakness.

Three people had died because she'd made the wrong call. Not because she wasn't good enough. Because she'd dismissed the data that would have saved them.

The Codex showed her the pattern. Complete. Obvious. If she'd followed it, the breach would have been contained. Three people would have lived.

*Was it there?*

Yes. It was always there. And she'd chosen not to see it.

She set the page down. Her fingers resumed their pattern. Circle. Circle. Interlock. The rhythm that meant nothing and everything.

Shammy picked up the page. The ink crawled.

The vision came differently for her. Not images. Pressure. Atmospheric weight. The sense of being something else before being a person.

The storm. The one she'd been before she chose.

She was vast. Formless. A pressure system that had traveled oceans, gathered moisture, built charge. She'd been beautiful. Powerful. She'd made landfall on three continents, brought rain to drought-stricken fields, torn roofs from buildings that needed tearing.

She remembered being weather. The freedom of it. No boundaries. No body. Just movement and pressure and the endless cycle of condensation and precipitation.

The vision showed her the moment of choice. The moment a child had prayed. Not for rain, but for someone to talk to. The moment Shammy had felt that prayer and decided to answer.

Decided to become.

*What if you hadn't become a person? What if you'd stayed weather?*

The question pressed into her. The doubt underneath her wound. She'd chosen humanity. But the choice had cost something. The storm was still inside her. The weather she'd been before she'd been Shammy.

In the vision, she saw herself from outside. A storm system taking human form. The pain of contraction. Squeezing herself into a shape that didn't fit. The loss of vastness. The gain of...

What?

Connection. Touch. Love.

The triad. Mai's analytical warmth. Ace's silent presence. The family she'd chosen when she'd chosen to be human.

*Did you choose wrong?*

The vision released her.

---

She set the page down.

"The Codex doesn't show fear." Warm. But thinner than usual. "It shows doubt. The question underneath."

"Did you choose wrong?" Flat.

"I don't know." Shammy's hair lifted. Atmospheric response to emotional weight. "Maybe the storm was easier. Maybe being weather didn't hurt."

"But?"

"But I wouldn't have you." Her warmth returned. "Or Mai. Or the triad."

The atmospheric pressure in the room shifted. Despite the sterile air. Despite the climate control. Shammy's warmth pushed through, making the space more breathable. More like outside.

"The thief gave us something." Mai's voice had resumed its analytical cadence. Her fingers traced their pattern. "The Codex showed us our doubts. But it also showed us something else. Underneath the guilt-memetic, there's text. Real text. Hidden layer."

"You found it?" Ace's shadow-pressure shifted.

"The Codex is a weapon. But it's also a book." Mai traced patterns on the page. "The thief left us something. Information about Fragment containment. About how they're made. About..."

"About Silent Vessels." Flat.

"About how to create them." Mai's pattern-tracing stopped. "Or how to release them."

---

The argument continued. But it had changed.

Mai: "The information could help us calculate a release. We need the data."

Shammy: "The information could help someone create more Silent Vessels. More children like Ace."

Ace stood between them. The mechanical bird ticking. The shadow-pressure contracting.

"The thief wants to destroy the records. All of them." Flat. "They don't want anyone to have the knowledge of how to make us."

"They're not wrong." Analytical. "But the knowledge could also help. The release method. The survival rate."

"Or it could create more of us." Ace's eyes were violet. "More children in villages. More Blood-Moons. More survivors who don't remember why they survived."

"You're protecting yourself." Mai's pattern-tracing resumed. "Tactical. But not necessarily optimal."

"I'm protecting everyone who comes after me." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "I'm not making the bargain. I'm not giving the thief my memories. And I'm not letting anyone else have the knowledge of how to make Silent Vessels."

She looked at the Codex page.

"But I will take what they gave me. The hidden text. The information about Fragment release. And I will use it to decide what happens next."

---

Shammy's warmth settled. The air in the room shifted. Less sterile. More breathable.

"You're deciding together." Warm. "Not alone. Not the shadow making decisions in the dark."

"Mai needs to calculate." Flat. "She needs data. I'm giving her that."

"And Shammy?" Analytical.

"Shammy needs to feel the atmosphere." Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. "The thief's intentions. The truth underneath. She reads what I can't see."

"And what do you need?" Shammy's hair lifted.

"To hold both Fragments." Ticking. "To stay stable. To survive long enough to decide what to do with Violet."

"Three vectors." Warmer. "Depth, Horizontal, Vertical. The triad lock."

"We decide together." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "Not because I'm making the decisions. Because we're making them."

---

The thief had given them something. Not taken anything.

The Codex Umbra page lay on the table. The hidden text was visible now. Information about Fragment release. About Silent Vessels. About the cost of liberation.

And a note, in handwriting that wasn't Mai's but followed her pattern:

*You would have kept it. I know you. I was you.*

The thief had been here. Had left the Codex page on the altar of the small chapel. Had known Mai would find it. Had known she would decode the hidden text.

Had known the triad would have to decide.

---

"Three manuscripts stolen." Analytical. "The Codex Umbra, the Silence Protocol, the Fragment Catalogue. The thief has the Protocol. They're destroying it. We have the Codex. The Catalogue is still missing."

"And the hidden text tells us where the Catalogue is." Flat.

"A monastery outside Rome." Mai traced the pattern. "Abandoned. Sealed by the Vatican fifty years ago. The thief's next target is there."

"Then we go there." Shammy's warmth settled. "Together. All three vectors."

"The thief will be there." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded.

"Good." Analytical. "Then we can ask them about release. Without giving them your memories."

"And if they try to take them?"

Shammy's atmospheric pressure shifted. Warm. Protective.

“Then they'll find out what happens when you threaten the triad.”

---

The Codex page stayed on the table. The hidden text was clear now.

Fragment release. Silent Vessel creation. The cost of liberation.

The thief had given them a weapon. But they'd also given them a choice.

What do you owe the truth when the truth has been weaponized against you?

The clockwork sparrow ticked in her pocket. Wind and unwind. The rhythm of survival.

She would hold Violet. She would hold the burning Fragment. She would hold the truth.

And she would decide what to do with all of it.

Together.

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END OF CHAPTER SIX

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