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Chapter 2: Fragment Echo

Istanbul.

The city layered on itself. Centuries pressing against centuries, empires built on the bones of empires. Shabby's atmospheric sense expanded for the first time since leaving the safehouse. The air here was alive. Pressure systems that moved like breath. Weather that had been weathering for a thousand years.

She could feel the age. The weight of air breathed by Romans, Byzantines, Ottomans. The atmosphere remembered.

"Youssef's village is outside the city." Mai's tablet traced coordinates. "Thirty kilometers north. Mountain terrain. The containment architecture is integrated into the landscape. Natural formations that have been modified. Ritual stones. Liminal spaces."

The transport followed roads that became narrower, then tracks, then nothing. Shabby's stormfront expanded. The air was cleaner here. Less pollution, more pressure systems. She could feel the mountains breathing.

"Ace." Mai's voice was precise. "The Catalogue. It's changing again. Someone accessed it remotely while we were in transit. The coordinates for Youssef's location. The signature shows Vatican encryption. But the pattern..."

"The pattern is Foundation."

"Foundation. Modified. The same signature we saw in Lisbon. Whoever is collecting Fragment signatures has access to both Vatican archives and Foundation technology."

The mechanical bird in Ace's palm. Wind, unwind. Violet's presence pressed against her consciousness. Not words. Recognition.

They're close. Violet's presence shifted. The one who gathers. I can feel them. Not what they are. But what they carry.

"Violet senses something." The shortest sentence. "The collector. They're carrying something that resonates with Fragment signatures."

Mai's hand pressed flat against her thigh. The tremor was visible. Copper and static. "The extraction machine. It doesn't just collect signatures. It stores them. The collector is carrying the signatures of the dead holders."

Dead. Violet's presence was close. The ones who were like us. The ones who held pieces of what we were.

"The collector is carrying three Fragment signatures." Shabby's warmth expanded. "Three pieces of the Scattered. Dead hosts, but living signatures."

“And they're heading for Youssef.”

The village was called Kayalar. Stone houses built into the mountainside. A stream cutting through the center. Limestone formations carved with symbols older than the village itself.

Shammy felt the containment architecture before she saw it. The air moved differently here. Ritual patterns embedded in atmospheric pressure. Weather that had been shaped by human intention. The mountain itself was a container.

“The village has been here for four hundred years.” Mai's tablet showed historical records. “Youssef's family has been the container lineage for six generations. Each holder passes the Fragment to the next. The village protects them.”

“Six generations.” Ace's mechanical bird ticked. “Six holders. And no one has gathered them before.”

“The Scattered was scattered.” Mai's tone was precise. “The pieces were designed to stay apart. Gathering them is intentional. Someone is reversing the scattering deliberately.”

The village elders met them at the perimeter. Not hostile. Cautious. They'd been warned by the Foundation that someone might come. They hadn't been warned that someone else was already coming.

“The boy is inside.” The elder spoke Turkish. Mai's translation software processed in real-time. “The containment stones are holding. But the Fragment has been... restless. Waking. Something is calling to it.”

“Calling.”

“The air has been wrong. The stones have been warm. The boy says the presence inside him is responding to something outside.” The elder's eyes moved to Shammy. “You feel it. The pressure. Something is approaching.”

Shammy's atmospheric sense expanded. The elder was right. The air was wrong. Not stagnant like the safehouse, but disturbed. Pressure systems moving in patterns that weren't natural. Something was pushing against the containment architecture.

Machines. Violet's presence pressed. Not natural. Something mechanical. Something built to call us.

“Violet says it's a machine.” The shortest sentence. “Something designed to call Fragment signatures.”

“The extraction device.” Mai's hand trembled. “The same signature from Lisbon. It's here. Or approaching.”

Youssef was fourteen.

He sat in the central house, his family's house, the container house. The walls were lined with containment stones. Limestone carved with symbols that predated the village. The Fragment inside him had been sleeping for six years.

Now it was waking.

"You're like me." Youssef spoke Turkish. His voice hadn't changed yet. Still a child's voice. But his eyes were older. Much older. "You hold something. Something that wants to be whole."

Ace's shadow-pressure filled the room. The mechanical bird in her palm.

"Yes."

"I hold something too." Youssef's hand moved to his chest. "It's been quiet. Since I was small. But now..." His voice cracked. "Now it's loud. Something is calling to it. Something wants it to wake up."

The same thing that calls to me. Violet's presence expanded. *The same frequency. The same intention. Someone wants us to gather.*

"Someone is waking your Fragment." Ace knelt. Her shadow-pressure contracted. Focused, controlled. "The same someone who killed three other holders. They're collecting signatures. They want the pieces to come together."

"Will you kill me?" Youssef's voice was flat. Not afraid. Resigned. "The others. The ones who died. The Fragment didn't kill them. Something else did."

"The extraction machine. It killed the hosts to collect the signatures." Ace's shadow-pressure pushed. "I won't let that happen to you."

"You can't stop it." Youssef's eyes were old. "The thing that's coming. It's already here."

The machine arrived at dusk.

Not a person. Mechanical. Four-legged, moving with the precision of ritual architecture. It had been designed to navigate terrain, to bypass containment, to extract without killing. Designed by someone who understood Fragments.

Shammy's atmospheric sense screamed. The air around the machine was wrong. Not stagnant, but consumed. The pressure systems that should have existed were gone. The machine ate atmosphere.

"It's Foundation technology." Mai's tablet analyzed the signature. "Modified. Vatican ritual architecture embedded in the chassis. The extraction frequency is..."

Her hand trembled. Copper and static. The taste before the equation failed.

"The extraction frequency is designed to wake dormant Fragments." Mai pressed her palm flat. "To make them active. To make them want to gather. It's not just collecting signatures. It's agitating the pieces."

That's why I've been waking. Violet's presence pressed. *That's why I've been closer. The machine isn't just calling to Youssef's Fragment. It's been calling to all of us. For months.*

The machine stopped at the perimeter of the village. The containment stones began to glow.

"It's testing the architecture." Mai's tone was precise. "Looking for weaknesses. The extraction frequency..."

"Is designed to bypass." Ace stood. "Violet. Can you communicate with it?"

The machine? Violet's presence shifted. No. It's not intelligent. It's a tool.

"Not the machine." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "Youssef's Fragment. Can you communicate with the other piece?"

...I can try.

Violet's presence expanded through Ace. Not hostile. Curious. A voice that wasn't words reaching toward another voice that wasn't words.

The machine activated.

The extraction frequency was sound below sound. Vibration below vibration. Shammy's atmospheric sense felt it before she heard it. The air itself was being tuned to a specific resonance.

The containment stones cracked.

Youssef's Fragment screamed.

Not words. Presence. A frequency of want and need and desperate longing. Six years of dormancy shattered in seconds. The presence inside Youssef was awake.

And it wanted to gather.

Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. The mechanical bird in her palm. Wind, unwind. Violet's presence pressed against the other Fragment. Not to communicate. To stabilize.

You've been asleep. Violet's presence reached through Ace. You've been quiet. You don't want to wake. Not like this.

The other Fragment didn't respond with words. It responded with want. The need to be whole. The need to find the other pieces. The need that had been sleeping, now awakened by the machine's frequency.

They're using your need. Violet's presence pressed. They're waking you so you'll call to the others. So you'll draw the Hunter.

The other Fragment's presence shifted. Confusion. Fear. A child's Fragment, bound to a child's mind, confronted with something it didn't understand.

Help. The other Fragment reached. Make it stop.

Shammy's stormfront pushed against the extraction frequency. Her atmospheric presence wasn't strong enough to counter the machine. Not here. Not in this terrain. But she could dampen. She could reduce.

Mai's fingers traced patterns on her palm. The machine's architecture. The ritual mathematics. The

circuit designed to extract.

"The machine is drawing power from local reality." Mai's tone was precise. "Same pattern as the Hunter. It's consuming coherence to fuel extraction. If I can find the circuit..."

Her hand trembled. The taste of copper and static. The equation failing before she could solve it.

"Ace." Mai's voice cracked. "I need more time. The pattern is..."

The machine turned toward Ace.

Not toward Youssef. Toward Ace. The extraction frequency shifted. The resonance that had been calling to Youssef's Fragment was now calling to Violet.

It wants me. Violet's presence expanded. It's been designed to call to us. To wake us. To make us want to gather. And now it wants to extract.

Ace's shadow-pressure spiked. The weight of her presence. The void that made rooms feel smaller.

"Violet." The shortest sentence. "Can you stop it?"

The machine isn't intelligent. It's a tool. But the frequency... I can try to counter it. But it will mean letting me closer. Letting me expand through you.

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

"Do it."

Violet's presence expanded.

Not hostile. Not consuming. But present. More present than she'd been in six months. The Fragment that had been learning to negotiate was now taking more space than she'd ever taken.

Ace felt the boundaries blur. Not dissolution. Integration. The shadow-pressure that was Ace's became Violet's became something shared.

The machine's frequency. Violet's presence was words now. Direct communication. It's designed to activate us. To make us want to gather. But I've been gathering already. I absorbed the burning Fragment. I've been wanting more.

Ace's shadow-pressure pushed against the machine's extraction frequency. Not to destroy. To communicate. Violet's presence reached through the resonance.

You're calling to us. Violet's presence pressed. But you're not the only one who can call.

The machine's frequency shifted. Trying to counter. Trying to adapt.

But Violet had been bound to a host for twenty years. She'd learned to negotiate. She'd learned to communicate. The Fragment inside Youssef had been sleeping.

Wake. Violet's presence reached toward the other Fragment. But don't gather. Not like this. The one who's calling you wants to draw the Hunter. Wants to consume us. Don't give them what they want.

Youssef's Fragment stirred. Confused. Afraid. But present. Awake.

How do I stop wanting? The other Fragment pressed. *I've been asleep. I don't know how to be awake without wanting.*

You negotiate. Violet's presence expanded. *You learn. The same way I learned.*

The machine's extraction frequency intensified.

It wasn't designed to extract yet. It was designed to agitate. To wake. To make Fragments want to gather. But it couldn't adapt to Violet's counter-frequency. It hadn't been designed for a Fragment that could negotiate.

Shammy's stormfront found the gap. The space where the machine's resonance was weakest. Her atmospheric presence pushed. Not to destroy. To redirect.

Mai's hand pressed flat. The tremor stopped. The equation solved.

"The circuit is in the legs." Mai's voice was precise. "The machine draws from local reality through contact points. If we disrupt the grounding..."

Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. Violet's presence pushed through. The mechanical bird in her palm wound and unwound.

Mai. Violet's presence was audible now. Not just Ace's internal voice. Audible to the triad. *The grounding points. Left side. The machine is drawing from the stones.*

"Left side." Mai's tone was precise. "Shammy. The atmospheric disruption. Can you create a pressure differential at the left contact points?"

Shammy's warmth expanded. The air itself moved. The machine's left legs lifted, searching for ground, finding nothing but vacuum.

The extraction frequency stuttered.

Ace moved.

The mechanical bird stopped ticking.

Ace's shadow-pressure collapsed. Not inward. Outward. The void that made rooms feel smaller became a void that made reality thin. The machine's legs found ground, but the ground wasn't stable. The reality around it was being erased.

Not the Hunter's erasure. Violet's presence pressed through Ace. *My erasure. The void I came from. The space between that I remember.*

The machine's extraction frequency screamed. Not designed for this. Not designed for a Fragment that could push back.

The containment stones shattered.

Youssef's Fragment woke fully. Not gathering. Not yet. But present. Awake. And confused.

What do I do? The child's Fragment pressed. *I've never been awake like this.*

You negotiate. Violet's presence expanded. *You survive.*

The machine collapsed.

Not destroyed. Deactivated. Its extraction frequency cut off. The agitation stopped. Youssef's Fragment was awake, but no longer being called.

Shammy's stormfront contracted. The air returned to normal. The atmospheric pressure that had been consumed began to breathe again.

Mai's hand pressed flat against her thigh. The tremor was visible. The taste of copper and static. "The machine sent a signal before it deactivated. Coordinates. Signature. Someone knows we're here."

"Someone knows Youssef's Fragment is awake." Ace's shadow-pressure contracted. "Someone knows we interfered."

Youssef stood in the ruined containment stones. His Fragment was present. Not gathering, not fighting. Just awake. For the first time in six years.

What happens now? His Fragment pressed. Not words. Presence. *I'm awake. I want things now. I don't know how to want.*

"You learn." Ace's voice was flat. "The same way I learned. The same way Violet learned. Negotiation. Integration. Survival."

And the thing that sent the machine? The thing that's gathering signatures?

"They'll keep coming." Ace's mechanical bird ticked. Wind, unwind. "But we'll keep coming too. We'll find them first."

The village elders watched as the triad prepared to leave. Youssef would come with them. Not permanently, but temporarily. His Fragment was awake. He needed to learn to negotiate. The village's containment architecture was broken. He couldn't stay.

"The collector knows we're here." Mai's tablet showed signal trajectories. "The extraction machine transmitted before deactivation. Istanbul coordinates. Rome coordinates. The signature was Foundation military encryption."

"Someone inside the Foundation." Shammy's warmth was thin. "Someone with access to both Vatican archives and Foundation technology."

"Someone who knows about Fragments." Ace's shadow-pressure expanded. "Someone who knows what they're waking. Someone who knows what the gathering will call."

The Hunter. Violet's presence was close now. Closer than she'd been in six months. *They're calling the Hunter. And they're using us to do it.*

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

"Where's the next coordinate?"

"Morocco." Mai's tone was precise. "The next named Fragment holder. And the collector's signature is already moving."

The transport left before dawn.

Youssef sat in the back, his Fragment present but quiet. Learning. Negotiating. The way Ace had learned. The way Violet had taught.

The clockwork sparrow ticked. Wind, unwind. The weight of Violet inside her. The shadow-pressure that made transport vehicles feel like coffins.

Six months since the hunter retreated.

And the gathering had already begun.

END OF CHAPTER TWO

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