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Chapter 3: Burning Hair

<!-- Word count: ~4,600 | Target: 4,600 | Anchor: The smell—sharp, organic, wrong | Structural: Memory Flash -->

She didn't make it past the corner.

The fragment pulled. Hard. The depth-vector pointed toward something, somewhere, and her body stopped before she could take more than ten steps. The harbor district's morning light cut across the street, and somewhere in the distance, a ship's horn sounded. But all Ace could feel was the pull.

This way.

She didn't know where “this way” was. She just knew the direction. A feeling in her chest, like gravity tilted sideways. A pressure behind her eyes that pointed toward the relay point Mai had identified.

She stopped. Stood still. Let the fragment pull.

This way.

“Wait.”

Shammy's voice came from behind. Her presence shifted the atmospheric pressure before Ace even heard her footsteps. The storm moving through the street, catching up. At 195 centimeters, Shammy moved through the crowd like a landmark, people parting around her without knowing why, the air pressure shifting in her wake.

“You didn't get far.”

“I know.”

“The fragment pulled you back.”

“I know.”

Shammy didn't ask questions. Didn't demand explanations. She just moved to stand next to Ace, her presence a weather system filling the space. The vertical vector, seeing what the depth couldn't.

“The relay point.” Shammy's voice was warm. “That's where it's pulling.”

“Maybe.”

“I can feel it too. The pressure's different there. Someone was watching. Someone atmospheric.” She paused. “Like me, but not.”

Ace's stillness deepened. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know." Shammy's presence shifted. "But we should go together."

"I know."

"You keep saying that."

"It fits."

Shammy moved closer. Not touching, never touching, not without permission. But present. "Mai is counting the steps to follow us. She's trying to give us space. But she's not going to let you go alone."

"I know."

"Then why did you—"

"Because I had to try." Ace's voice was flat. Controlled. "I had to know if the fragment would let me."

"And?"

"It didn't."

The harbor district spread before them. Narrow streets, warehouses, the smell of salt and industry. Somewhere in that maze, the relay point waited. Somewhere in that maze, the fragment pointed.

"Let's go." Shammy's presence shifted toward the direction the fragment pulled. "Together."

Mai caught up before they reached the first intersection.

She didn't say anything. Just fell into step beside them, her presence analytical, measuring. The counter was running in her head, Ace could tell by the way her fingers tapped her leg. One. Two. Three.

"I found the relay point." Mai's voice was careful. "It's a warehouse near the harbor. Abandoned, but not empty. Someone's been using it."

"Shammy said someone atmospheric was there."

"Someone like Shammy." Mai's fingers counted. "That's unusual. There aren't many atmospheric entities in the region. Most of them avoid populated areas."

"Maybe."

"The question is, was it the courier? Or someone watching?"

Ace didn't answer. The fragment pulled. Harder now. The depth-vector pointed toward a building at the end of the street. A warehouse. Boarded windows. The kind of place that looked abandoned but wasn't.

This way.

Her body moved before her mind decided. Toward the warehouse. Toward the pull. The fragment pressing against her chest, the shadow-pressure flickering at her edges.

"Ace." Mai's voice cut through. "You're moving without thinking."

"I know."

"The fragment—"

"Is pulling. I'm following."

"That's not—" Mai stopped. Her counting had stopped too. "That's not how we work."

"I know."

"Then why—"

"Because it wants something." Ace's voice was hard. Controlled. "And I need to know what."

The warehouse loomed ahead. Boarded windows. Rust on the doors. The kind of place that had been empty for years but showed signs of recent use. The fragment pulled toward it like gravity.

Shammy moved ahead. Her presence shifted, reading the atmospheric residue. "Someone was here. Recently. The pressure's wrong, like something left a shadow in the air."

"The courier?"

"Maybe." Shammy's voice was thoughtful. "Or someone watching. Someone who wanted us to find this place."

"Or someone who wanted me to find it."

The words came out before Ace could stop them. The fragment pulled. The depth-vector pointed. And underneath the pull was something else, something that felt almost like recognition.

This way.

She moved toward the door.

The smell hit her before she crossed the threshold.

Burning hair.

It came without warning. No context. No memory attached. Just the smell, sharp, organic, wrong. And underneath it, something else. Violet light. A child's voice screaming.

Vera!

The name surfaced without warning. A bubble in deep water, breaking through, vanishing before she could catch it. But this time it didn't vanish. This time it stayed.

Vera!

The child's voice. A hand reaching for hers. Violet light everywhere, pressing against her eyes, her skin, her shadow-pressure. And the smell. Burning hair. Heat. Something screaming in the distance, or maybe right next to her, or maybe inside her.

Vera!

Ace's hands went to her head. The pressure was too much. The fragment pulling, pushing, trying to show her something. But the images were fragmented. Incomplete. A face she couldn't see. A hand reaching for hers. A voice screaming a name she didn't know.

And then—

The doorframe. She was too small. The doorknob was above her head. She stood on her toes and still couldn't reach. Smoke poured through the cracks. Her sister's body lay on the floor. She couldn't reach the doorknob. She couldn't call for help. She was too small.

She had always been too small.

Vera!

"Ace!"

Shammy's voice cut through. The atmospheric pressure shifted, Shammy's presence pushing against the fragment's pull, grounding the space around her.

"Ace. Come back."

The smell faded. The violet light vanished. The hand reaching for hers pulled away, disappearing into the fragment's depths. But the doorframe remained. The too-high doorknob. The smoke. The body she couldn't save.

Ace's stillness was absolute. The kind that meant something had broken, and she was the only one who could feel it.

"What—" Her voice came out wrong. Hard. Controlled. "What was that?"

"The fragment." Shammy's presence was close now. Grounding. "It's pulling you somewhere. Showing you something."

"That's not—" Ace stopped. The smell was still there, ghost-like, lingering at the edges of her perception. Burning hair. The doorframe. The height she'd never been. "That's not how it works. The fragment doesn't show me things. It just pulls."

"This one did."

"Maybe."

That wasn't a maybe. That was something else.

Ace's hands were shaking. She pressed them against her sides. The stillness was back, but it was different now. Shaky. Fractured.

The smell lingered. Burning hair. Heat. A child's voice screaming a name.

Vera.

And underneath it: the doorframe. The too-high doorknob. Her sister's body. She'd found her sister's body and she couldn't reach the doorknob and she'd stood there, too small, while the smoke poured in.

"I don't know that name." The words came out hard. "I've never heard it before."

"But it came anyway."

"Maybe."

That wasn't a maybe either.

Mai appeared in the doorway. Her fingers were counting. One. Two. Three. She'd been scanning the warehouse while Shammy grounded Ace. Pulling threads. Making patterns.

"Someone was here." Mai's voice was analytical. Careful. "Recently. Within the last few hours. The atmospheric residue Shammy found matches the courier, but there's something else."

"Someone else."

"Two someone elses." Mai's counting stopped. "One was the courier. Atmospheric. Like Shammy, but not. The other—" She paused. "The other was watching. They've been here for three days. Watching this location. Waiting for someone."

"Waiting for me."

"Maybe."

Ace's stillness deepened. The fragment pulled again, softer now, like it had shown her what it needed to show and was waiting for her to understand.

Vera.

The name surfaced again. Not a bubble this time. A fact. Something the fragment knew that her mind didn't.

"I need to see the relay point."

"You just—"

"I know what I just saw." Ace's voice was hard. "I need to see it anyway."

The warehouse was empty.

Not abandoned-empty. Used-empty. The kind of empty that meant someone had been here recently and left nothing behind. Mai's threads pulled at nothing, no papers, no documents, no traces of who had used the space.

But Shammy's atmospheric reading was different.

"Two people." Shammy's presence moved through the space, reading the residue. "One was the courier. Light step, careful movement. She came in, left the letter, left again. She didn't stay."

"The other?"

"Watching." Shammy's voice was thoughtful. "Three days. Maybe longer. The pressure residue is heavy, like someone was sitting in one spot for a long time. Waiting."

"For us?"

"Maybe." Shammy moved to the corner where the residue was strongest. "Or for you specifically. The atmospheric signature was focused on this spot. Like they knew you'd come here."

Ace's stillness was back. The fragment pulled, gently now, not the sharp tug from before. Just a direction. A pointing.

This way.

She moved toward the back of the warehouse. Toward the spot where the fragment pulled. Shadow-pressure at her edges flickered, visible in the dim light.

There was nothing there. Just a wall. Boards and rust and the smell of old industry.

But the fragment pulled. Harder now. Like there was something underneath the wall. Something underneath the boards. Something her depth-vector could feel but her eyes couldn't see.

"I need—" She stopped. "I need Mai to look at this."

Mai was already there. Her analytical presence moved through the space, pulling threads that weren't visible.

"There's something behind the wall." Mai's voice was careful. "The boards are loose. Not rotten, loose. Like someone wanted them to be removable."

"Someone wanted us to find this."

"Maybe."

Mai pulled at the boards. They came away easily. Too easily. Like they'd been placed there specifically to be found.

Behind the boards was a niche. Small. Hidden. Empty except for one thing.

A piece of cloth. Water-damaged, like the letter. But this one was different. This one had a stain that wasn't water.

Blood. Old blood. Brown with age.

And underneath the blood, a symbol. Burned into the fabric.

Ace's shadow-pressure spiked. The fragment pulled, sharp, sudden, overwhelming. The smell came back. Burning hair. Violet light. A child's voice screaming.

Vera!

But this time, there was something else. The symbol. Burned into the fabric. Burned into her fragment's memory.

She'd seen it before.

Not in this life. Not in any memory she could access. But the fragment recognized it. Knew it. Flinched from it.

And then: the doorframe again. The too-high doorknob. Standing on her toes. Reaching. The smoke. Her sister's body.

"Ace." Mai's voice was careful. "Do you know what this is?"

"No."

"Your shadow-pressure—"

"I don't know what it is."

The words came out hard. Harder than she meant. The fragment pulled, and underneath the pull was something else. Something that felt almost like fear.

Not that. Not again.

She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. The pressure helped. Sometimes.

But the smell was still there. Burning hair. The doorframe. Her sister's body. Too short. Always too short.

Vera.

And underneath the name, something else. Something the fragment was trying to show her.

A hand reaching for hers. A face she couldn't see. A voice saying—

Run.

"Someone's been watching this location for three days."

Mai's voice cut through the fragment's pull. Her analytical presence was fully engaged now, pulling threads, making patterns.

"The atmospheric residue Shammy found, it's not just watching. It's surveillance. Whoever was here, they knew we'd come. They wanted us to find this place."

"Or they wanted me to find it."

The words came out before Ace could stop them. The fragment pulled. The depth-vector pointed. And underneath it all, something she couldn't name.

This way.

"That symbol." Mai's fingers counted. One. Two. Three. "You recognized it."

"No."

"Ace—"

"I don't know what it is."

"Your shadow-pressure—"

"I don't know."

The words were hard. Controlled. But her hands were still shaking. The smell lingered at the edges. Burning hair. The doorframe. Too short.

Shammy's presence shifted. The atmospheric pressure changed. "Someone's coming."

Ace's fragment pulled. Hard. The depth-vector pointed toward the door.

Not yet. Not ready.

"Move."

Her voice was hard. Controlled. But underneath it was something else. Something that felt almost like fear.

They moved.

Outside, the harbor district was waking up. Ships sounding. Workers moving. The normal rhythm of a city that didn't know what had happened in the warehouse.

But someone had been watching. Someone had been waiting for three days. Someone had left a symbol that made Ace's fragment flinch.

And somewhere in the fragment's depths, a child's voice was still screaming a name she didn't know.

Vera.

Ace stood in the street. The morning light cut through the haze. The fragment pulled, gently now, pointing toward something. Somewhere.

"Someone had been watching the meeting location for three days." Shammy's voice was warm. Careful. "I could feel the residue of their attention in the air pressure patterns. Whoever they were, they already knew the triad was coming."

Ace's stillness was back. The kind that meant something had moved, and she couldn't stop it.

"Then we're being tracked."

"Maybe."

"By whom?"

"I don't know." Shammy's presence shifted. "But the atmospheric residue, there was something wrong with it. Like me, but not. Like someone atmospheric, but—" She paused. "Broken. Wrong at the edges."

"Like a construct."

"Maybe." Shammy's voice was thoughtful. "Or like something that was made, not born."

Ace's fragment pulled. Harder now. The depth-vector pointing toward something.

This way.

She didn't move. The smell was still there. Burning hair. The doorframe. Her sister's body.

Vera.

"I don't know that name." The words came out hard. Controlled. "I've never heard it before."

"But it came anyway."

"Maybe."

That wasn't a maybe. That was something else.

The fragment pulled. The smell lingered. And somewhere underneath the stillness, something was moving.

Something that had been waiting for three days.

Something that knew they'd come.

Something that wanted Ace to find exactly what she'd found.

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