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Chapter 4 — The Witness

Ace found her in the third alley she checked.

Not the first. Not the second. The third, past a bakery that smelled like fresh bread and a tailor's shop that displayed jackets in perfect arrangements. The alley was narrow, shadowed, empty.

Except it wasn't.

Ace felt the trace before she saw it. The pressure in her chest tightened. A familiar warning. She pressed her palm flat against the wall and reached down.

There.

A presence. Faint, like a shadow in sunlight. Someone who didn't fit the pattern.

Ace followed the trace. Her footsteps made no sound on the cobblestones. Her hand stayed flat against the wall, reading the stone.

The alley opened onto a small courtyard. A well in the center. Laundry hanging from lines. Windows shuttered against the afternoon sun.

And a woman sitting on a bench, her hands wrapped around a cup of something that wasn't tea.

Ace approached slowly. The woman didn't look up. Her hands were shaking. Fine tremors, like she'd been holding on too long.

"You're different." Ace said.

The woman's head came up slowly. Her face was lined, weathered, real. Her eyes weren't smiling.

Her eyes were haunted.

"You can see me?" The woman's voice came out rough. Unused.

"Yes."

The woman laughed. It wasn't a happy sound. "Then you're different too."

Ace sat on the edge of the bench. Not too close. Enough distance to move if she needed to.

"What's your name?"

"Does it matter?" The woman's hands tightened on the cup. "Names don't stick here. I had a name once. A family. A life. And then..."

She trailed off. Her eyes went distant.

Ace waited. Counted her breaths. Twelve. Thirteen.

"What happened?"

The woman shuddered. "I don't... I can't..."

"Try."

A long pause. The woman's face twisted, struggling against something invisible. Her jaw clenched. Her eyes squeezed shut.

"Fire." A whisper. "I remember fire. A great fire. And screaming. And then... nothing. Nothing but the peace."

Ace leaned forward. "When? When did the fire happen?"

"I don't..." The woman's hands shook harder. "It was... before. Long before. But I can't... the years won't hold..."

"How long have you been here?"

"I don't know." Her voice cracked. "I don't know how long. I don't know what year it is. I don't..."

She stopped. Her breathing came fast, shallow.

Ace reached out. Her hand found the woman's arm. Gentle pressure.

"Look at me."

The woman's eyes met hers. Ace held the gaze. Steady. Present.

"You remember fire." Ace said. "That's more than anyone else in this city."

"I remember..." The woman's face crumpled. "I remember dying. I remember burning. And then I was here, and I was alive, and everyone said it had always been this way."

"Who is everyone?"

"The people. The smiles. They told me I'd always lived here. They told me I'd always been happy." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "But I remember burning. I remember the sound my bones made."

Ace didn't flinch. She held the woman's gaze. The pressure in her chest confirmed it. This was a true trace. Real memory. Something the optimization hadn't been able to erase.

"Can you show me where?"

"Where what?"

"Where you died. Where the fire was."

The woman's eyes went wide. "I... I don't know if I can..."

"Try."

They walked through the city together.

The woman, she said her name had been Miriam once, moved like someone who didn't trust the ground beneath her feet. Her steps were careful, measured. She flinched at sounds Ace couldn't hear.

"Where are we going?" Miriam asked.

"The plaza. The center."

"No." Miriam stopped. Her face went pale. "I can't go there. That's where..."

"Where what?"

"The fire." Her voice came out strangled. "That's where it started. The burning. The..."

She couldn't finish. Her hands came up to her face, covering her eyes.

Ace waited. Counted twelve heartbeats.

"I need you to show me." She said. "You're the only one who remembers."

"I don't want to remember."

"I know." Ace's voice came out flat. Compressed. "But if we don't find out what happened, it will happen again. To someone else. To another city."

Miriam lowered her hands. Her eyes were wet.

"Why should I believe you?"

"Because I can feel it too." Ace pressed her palm flat against her chest. "The violence. The battle. The death. It's written in the stone. And someone erased it."

Miriam stared at her for a long moment. Something shifted in her face.

"You're not like the others."

"No."

"You can see it. The wrongness."

"Yes."

Miriam exhaled. A long, shuddering breath.

"I'll show you." Her voice was barely a whisper. "But I can't promise I'll make it all the way."

The plaza was busy when they arrived.

People walking, smiling, living their regular lives. The woman selling flowers had set up her cart. The

man with the newspaper sat on his bench. Children played by the fountain.

Miriam stopped at the edge. Her face was gray.

"I can't..."

Ace took her hand. The contact was grounding. For both of them.

"One step at a time."

They walked. Past the flower cart. Past the bench. Past the children playing.

Miriam's grip tightened with each step. Her breathing came faster. Her eyes darted around the plaza, seeing something that wasn't there.

"There." Her voice cracked. "There. That's where..."

She pointed at the fountain.

The smooth stone. The neat arcs of water. The inscription: IN HONOR OF THOSE WHO BUILT VERDANT SPRINGS, 1847.

"That's where you died?"

Miriam nodded. Her whole body was shaking now.

"I was standing right there. When the fire came. It wasn't... it wasn't natural fire. It was something else. Something wrong. And then..."

She stopped. Her eyes went wide.

"I remember."

"What?"

"I remember more. It's coming back. The fire, and the screaming, and..." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "And the men. The men in the sky. They came down, and they did something, and the fire stopped. But then everything else stopped too."

"Men in the sky?"

Miriam nodded frantically. "Three of them. No, three of us. Three... I don't know what they were. But they came from above, and they did something, and the fire went out. And then..."

She trailed off. Her eyes went blank.

"Then what?"

"I... I can't... it's gone. It slipped away."

Ace kept hold of her hand. The pressure in her chest was intense now, a weight pressing down, confirming everything Miriam was saying.

"You said 'three of us.' What did you mean?"

Miriam's face twisted. "I don't... I don't know. It was there, and now it's..."

She pulled her hand free. Stepped back.

"I can't. I can't do this. It's too much."

"Miriam—"

"Leave me alone." Her voice was suddenly hard. "I told you what I know. I can't... I won't..."

She turned and walked away. Fast. Her steps uneven, desperate.

Ace let her go.

Mai was going to ask questions about this. Questions Ace didn't have answers to. She pushed the thought aside and headed back to the inn.

She found Mai and Shammy at the inn.

They'd gathered in Ace's room again. The too-soft bed, the too-perfect window, the too-wrong city below. Mai's notebook was open. Shammy stood by the window, reading the air.

"I found a witness." Ace said.

Both of them turned.

"Someone who remembers?"

Ace nodded. "Fragments. Fire. Dying. And something else." She pressed her hand against her chest. "She said three figures came from the sky. Three figures who did something to stop the fire. And then everything else stopped too."

Mai's pen was already moving. "Three figures. Men in the sky."

"She said 'three of us.' Like she was one of them. Or like they were like her."

Mai looked up from her notebook. "She identified with them?"

"I don't know what she meant. She couldn't hold the thought. It kept slipping."

Shammy turned from the window. "The air pressure confirms it. Something happened at that fountain. A release of energy. And then something contained it."

"The clocks." Mai said. "They're frozen at the moment the containment reached them. The optimization spread outward from that point, stopping time as it went."

Ace sat on the edge of the bed. The pressure in her chest hadn't eased. If anything, it had grown, a weight pressing down with everything she'd learned.

"Three figures stopped a fire." She said. "And in doing so, they erased an entire city's memory. Why?"

"That's what we need to find out." Mai said.

Shammy raised her hand to the window. The static charge in her fingers sparked.

"The storm is building." She said. "Whatever's buried here, it wants out. And we're the first ones in a long time who can feel it."

Ace looked at her partners. Mai, steady and analytical. Shammy, tall and storm-touched. The three of them, standing at the edge of something none of them fully understood.

"Tomorrow." Ace said. "We go to the center. We find out what's really buried here."

Mai nodded. Shammy's hand dropped from the window.

The city outside was dark now. Perfect streets, perfect buildings, perfect people living their perfect lives.

And beneath all of it, a secret that had been waiting for a hundred and seventy-nine years.

Tomorrow, the Triad would dig it up.

end of chapter four

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