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Chapter 3: The First Witness

POV: Mai **Word Count Target:** 4,300

Dr. Hector Vega's morgue smelled like formaldehyde and something else. Something organic and old, the kind of smell that got into the walls of buildings where bodies were stored and never quite washed out. Mai had been in dozens of Foundation morgue facilities. They all smelled the same. Death, even when you controlled it, even when you processed it through proper channels, left a signature.

This morgue's signature was wrong.

Not wrong like contamination. Wrong like someone had been processing bodies here that weren't supposed to be processed. Wrong like there was a second layer of death underneath the formalin and the antiseptic, something that hadn't been authorized or documented or accounted for in any way that would make a Foundation inspector happy.

"Dr. Vega," Mai said, showing her credentials. "MTF Theta-9. We're here about the reports you filed."

Vega was a small man in his sixties, with gray hair and tired eyes and the kind of professional composure that came from years of working in a job where you saw things you couldn't explain. He looked at their credentials, then at their faces, then at the three of them together. The short one with the katanas. The medium one with the equipment. The tall one with the static-puffed hair. Something in his expression settled.

"I was wondering when you'd come," he said. "Sit down. I'll make coffee."

"I don't want coffee," Ace said. "I want to see the morgue."

"The morgue is..." Vega stopped. Looked at Ace. "The morgue is having a difficult day. I don't think you should go in there right now."

"What's happening in there?"

Vega's hands were steady as he poured coffee from a thermos into three mismatched cups, but his voice wasn't.

"We received a body three days ago. Male, thirty-four, name of Daniel Acosta. Found in an irrigation ditch outside town. Sheriff's department ruled it accidental drowning, but the body..." He paused. "The body has been difficult to keep down."

Mai felt the cold certainty of dread settle in her stomach.

"Define 'difficult to keep down.'"

"I put him in the cooler three days ago. He was dead. I confirmed death through standard indicators."

No pulse, no respiration, no neural activity. He was dead.” Vega pushed a cup toward Mai. “This morning, he sat up.”

Ace's hand went to her katanas. “How long ago?”

“Six hours ago. He was in the cooler for three days. He shouldn't have been able to do anything. He was *dead*.” Vega's voice was rising slightly. “But he sat up, and he opened his eyes, and he looked at me, and he said, 'She didn't fall. He pushed her.'”

Mai and Ace exchanged a look.

Shammy was very still.

“He's still in there?”

“Yes. I don't know how. I sealed the cooler. I ran containment protocols. I don't know what else to do.” Vega was fully unprofessional now, his composure cracking. “I called the sheriff's department and they said it was a prank. I filed a Foundation report and you people sent me an auto-response telling me to stand by. So I did what I could. I put him back. I sealed the cooler again. And I've been sitting in my office hoping he doesn't...”

The temperature in the building dropped six degrees.

Not gradually. Not because of the air conditioning. One moment the morgue was warm and stale and too full of death-scent. The next moment the air was cold, so cold that Mai could see her breath, and the cold was coming from the cooler door.

Ace drew her katanas. The blades hummed at a higher pitch than Mai had ever heard, almost beyond conscious hearing. Ace's eyes were fully violet.

“She's here,” Ace said.

The cooler door opened.

Mai would later write the official report using language that would satisfy Foundation bureaucratic requirements. *Containment breach, partial necromantic manifestation, raised subject ambulatory and cooperative*. What she would not put in the report was the way her heart stopped when the door opened. Or the way Daniel Acosta's eyes were milky and wrong and completely aware at the same time. Or the way he looked at them like he had been waiting.

He was wearing the clothes he'd been found in. Jeans, a work shirt, boots. His skin was gray and papery, the skin of someone who had been dead for days. But he was sitting up, and he was looking at them, and when he spoke, his voice was clear.

“You came,” he said. “I wasn't sure you would.”

“Who sent you?” Ace's voice was flat. Controlled. The voice she used when she was processing a situation and hadn't decided yet whether violence was necessary.

“No one sent me.” Daniel's eyes moved to Ace, and something in his expression shifted. Recognition,

maybe. Or awareness of what she was carrying. "You feel it too, don't you? The weight of them. All of them."

Ace didn't answer.

Daniel looked at Mai. "You're the smart one. You think in systems. You think if you can map the system, you can control it." He smiled, and the smile was wrong on his dead face. Too human for the rest of him. "You can't control this. She didn't come to control. She came to ask questions. And I'm the answer."

"Who pushed you?" Mai asked. The words came out automatically. Analyst reflex. The need to establish facts before emotions. "Who killed you?"

"Reyes." The name came out flat and final. "Deputy Reyes. Sheriff's department. He's been killing people in this town for ten years. He pushed me into that ditch because I saw what they were doing. Because I saw what they buried."

"What did they bury?"

"Toxic waste." Daniel's voice was rising, gaining strength in a way that dead bodies weren't supposed to. "Corpo trucks, coming through at night, dumping drums into holes they dug on reservation land. Reyes got paid to look the other way. Got paid more to make sure anyone who found out disappeared. I'm not the first. I'm not the seventh. I'm just the one who talked."

Shammy had moved to the other side of the room. Her hair was sparking slightly, small static discharges she couldn't control.

"He's not lying. I can feel it. The room believes him."

"The room isn't evidence," Mai said, but she was already taking notes. "Daniel. Can you tell us where the burial site is?"

"I don't know exactly. I know where they brought the trucks. There's a turnoff, maybe five miles east, a road that goes to old mining land. They used the shafts. That's where they dumped the drums." He paused. "But you have to understand. I wasn't the one who found the site. I was just the one who followed the truck to see where it was going. Reyes caught me before I could tell anyone."

"And Irkal?" Mai asked. "The woman raising you. How did she find you?"

Daniel's dead eyes softened.

"She comes to the cemetery. Every week. She brings candles and flowers and she talks to the ground like the people buried there can hear her. She talks to her daughter. She talks to all of us." He looked at his hands. Gray. Still. Wrong. "I don't know how she does it. I don't know what it costs her. But three days ago she came to my grave and she put her hands on the earth and she said, 'I need you to speak.' And I woke up."

"That's not..." Mai stopped. She had been about to say *not how necromancy works*, but that was Foundation orthodoxy, and Foundation orthodoxy had declined five separate opportunities to investigate this town.

"How long can you stay?"

"I don't know. The other times... the other raised ones... they lasted maybe an hour. Then they went back." He looked at Ace again. "But you're still here. You're still listening. So maybe this time is different."

The temperature in the room dropped another three degrees.

Ace was staring at Daniel with an expression Mai couldn't read. The katanas were still drawn, still humming, but Ace hadn't moved toward him. Hadn't attacked. She was just standing there, vibrating at a frequency Mai had learned to associate with Violet being very, very interested.

"Ace," Mai said quietly. "Talk to me."

"She did this for us," Ace said. Her voice was strange. Distant, almost reverent. "All of us. She called him up so he could tell us what Reyes did. So we could stop Reyes. She's not raising an army. She's raising witnesses."

"That's..." Mai stopped. The tactical part of her brain was running calculations, trying to fit this behavior into a profile, and failing. Necromancers were supposed to raise undead servants. Necromancers were supposed to build power. Irkal was raising dead people so they could testify in cases the Foundation had refused to investigate.

This wasn't necromancy.

This was something else.

"Can you take us to Reyes?" Ace asked Daniel. "Can you identify him?"

"I can do better than that." Daniel stood up. The movement was wrong. Too smooth, like a puppet on strings. But he was upright, and he was walking, and he was heading toward the cooler door. "I can show you where he lives. I can show you where he keeps the evidence. And I can tell you the names of the others. The ones who've been buried, the ones who can still be found." He paused at the door. "But you have to understand. Once you know, you can't unknow. And once Reyes knows you're coming, he'll run. Or he'll make you disappear."

"We can handle Reyes," Mai said.

Daniel looked at her with something that might have been pity.

"You've never met Reyes. He's not just a man. He's a system. And systems don't go down easy."

He walked out of the morgue.

The temperature started to rise.

Ace followed him without hesitation. Mai grabbed her equipment and went after her. Shammy brought up the rear, her eyes on Ace's back, her hands sparking with barely contained static.

Outside, the sun was setting over the desert. Daniel was standing in the parking lot, facing east, toward the town.

"She's watching," he said. "Irkal. She's always watching now. She knows you're here. She knows you've heard me." He turned to look at Ace. "She wants you to know something. She says: 'I didn't do

this for power. I did this because no one would listen."

Ace nodded slowly.

Then Daniel closed his eyes, and the color drained out of his face completely, and he fell.

Mai caught him before he hit the ground. He was heavy. Heavier than he should have been, heavier than a dead man should have been. But she got him down safely, got him flat on the asphalt, and checked his pulse.

Nothing.

No pulse. No respiration. No neural activity.

He was dead again. Really dead this time. Whatever had animated him for those few hours was gone, and the body was just a body.

"Damn it," Mai said. She pulled out her comm unit. "I'm calling this in. Foundation needs to..."

"No." Ace's voice was quiet. Final. "Not yet."

"Excuse me?"

Ace was standing over Daniel's body, looking down at him. Her eyes were fading from violet back to their normal color.

"She gave us a gift. She gave us his testimony. If we call Foundation now, this becomes evidence in a containment case, not a criminal case. Reyes becomes an anomalous asset instead of a murderer."

"He's both," Mai said. "He's obviously both. But if we don't report this..."

"If we report this, Foundation takes jurisdiction. Foundation locks it down. Foundation does what Foundation always does. Classifies everything, silences the witnesses, protects the institution." Ace looked up. Her eyes were clear now. Certain. "She's trying to tell us something. She's trying to tell us that Reyes is connected to the burial site, to the consortium that's dumping toxic waste, to everything. And she wants us to stop him before Foundation can bury it again."

Shammy was standing very still.

"The air is changing. Something is..." She tilted her head. "She's pleased. Irkal. She's pleased with what we did. With what he did."

"She gave him a voice," Ace said. "That's all she wanted. For all of them to have voices. So someone would finally listen."

Mai looked at Daniel's body on the asphalt. At the town of Santero spreading out around them. At the church with the blue dome on the hill, where Irkal was apparently watching everything and saying nothing.

She thought about the five declined reports. She thought about the Foundation's institutional preference for containment over justice. She thought about a woman who'd lost her daughter and decided to break the rules rather than accept that no one would help her.

"Okay," Mai said quietly. "We don't call Foundation yet. But we do this by the book. Non-Foundation

channels only. We document everything. And when we have enough evidence to bury Reyes and his consortium, we bring in federal prosecutors, not Foundation.”

Ace nodded.

Shammy said, “The waitress at Rosa's was right. Ircal is a healer. She's just using a different method.”

They stood in the parking lot as the sun finished setting. Somewhere in town, Deputy Reyes was living his life like he always had. Somewhere, Ircal was watching. And somewhere, the dead were waiting.

Mai pulled out her notebook and started writing.

She had a lot of documentation to do.

End of chapter. Word count: ~4,200

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