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Chapter 4: Resonance

POV: Ace **Word Count Target:** 4,200

Ace woke at 2 AM with Violet stirring.

Not the slow simmer of attention. This was different. This was the fragment pressing against the inside of her ribs like something trying to get out. Like something that had caught a scent and couldn't let go.

She lay in the borrowed bed and felt it. The pull. East, slightly north. The same direction as the house Shammy had identified as the hottest point on Irkal's circuit. The same direction as the church with the blue dome.

The same direction as something that had been dead for seven years and was still dead but wasn't gone.

Ace got up. Mai was asleep in the other bed. Actually asleep, not the light doze she usually maintained on deployment. She must have been more tired than she looked. Shammy was on a mattress on the floor, her breathing slow and even, her hair still carrying a faint static charge even in sleep.

The air in the room felt thick. Charged. Like the moment before lightning strikes.

Ace pulled on her boots. Strapped on the katanas. Checked that Mai's disruptor was where she'd left it. Fully charged, safety on. She didn't take it. She didn't know why, but she didn't take it.

She let herself out the back door.

The desert at night was a different country from the desert in daylight. The heat had drained out of the rocks and the sand, leaving cold that came from the sky rather than the ground. Stars spread overhead in a way they never did in cities, in a way that made Ace feel small in the way that only vast emptiness could.

And underneath the stars, the pull.

She followed it.

The church was maybe half a mile from the house they'd borrowed. Ace moved through the darkness at a pace just shy of running, her body eating distance the way it always did when Violet was active. Smoothly. Efficiently. Without the wasted motion of someone who hadn't spent their whole life learning how to move through spaces that weren't designed for her.

The church's blue dome glowed faintly in the starlight. Old adobe, old wood, old prayers soaked into the walls. Ace could feel the death resonance building as she approached. Not the layered old grief of the town, but something sharper.

Something focused.

Someone was working.

She found the door standing open. The interior was dark except for candles. Dozens of candles, placed at the corners and the altar and in a pattern on the floor that Ace didn't recognize but Violet did. The pattern hummed at a frequency that made Ace's teeth ache.

And in the center of the pattern, Irkal.

She was smaller than Ace expected. 162 cm, maybe, if that. Slightly taller than Ace but so thin she looked fragile. Her hair was dark with gray streaks, pulled back from a face that had been weathered by sun and grief into something that looked older than her years. She was kneeling, her hands pressed flat against the floor, and she was speaking in a language Ace didn't recognize.

No.

Not a language she didn't recognize. A language she did. A language Violet knew.

Old Tongue. The language of things that had been neverborn and never-alive and had existed before the current rules of the world had been written.

Ace's hand went to her chest. Violet was pressing so hard now that it hurt.

"I know you're there," Irkal said. She didn't look up. "I felt you when you crossed the town line. I've been feeling you since."

Ace didn't move.

"How?"

"Because you're carrying something that was never alive." Irkal's voice was calm. Matter-of-fact. The voice of someone who had spent years talking to things that normal people couldn't see. "A fragment. A resonance. A piece of something that died before it ever lived. It's beautiful, what you're carrying. And it's hungry."

Ace's katanas were still on her back. She hadn't drawn them. She wasn't sure why.

"You're the one raising the dead."

"I'm the one asking questions." Irkal finally looked up. Her eyes were dark and tired and full of something that Ace recognized because she'd seen it in mirrors. "My daughter was murdered seven years ago. The sheriff said she fell. The sheriff was lying. I've spent seven years trying to prove it, and the only way I could prove it was to ask the dead what happened."

"And they told you."

"The dead always tell the truth. That's the cruelty of it." Irkal stood up slowly. She was wearing black.

Curandera black, the clothing of a healing tradition that reached back before the Spanish arrived. Her hands were stained with something that looked like ash. "The dead don't have reasons to lie. They don't have reputations to protect. They just remember."

Ace took a step forward. Then another. The candles flickered as she passed them, and the pattern on the floor seemed to shift. To reach toward her, almost. Violet hummed louder.

"She was fourteen," Ace said. "The daughter."

"Celeste." Irkal said the name like a prayer. "Fourteen years old. She went to the store for milk and never came home. They found her body six months later, three miles from town. The sheriff said she fell off the highway. The sheriff was lying." She paused. "Deputy Reyes killed her because she saw something she shouldn't have. She saw where his friends were burying toxic waste. She saw the trucks, the drums, the graves. She was fourteen and she tried to do the right thing and Reyes put her in the ground."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Irkal looked at her. Really looked, in a way that made Ace feel like she was being seen through rather than looked at.

"Because you've been in the ground too. Because you've carried guilt for so long that it's become part of you. Because you're standing in my church at two in the morning following a pull you don't understand, and I know what that feels like. To be pulled by something you can't name toward something you can't escape."

Ace's hand went to her chest again. Violet was very still now. Listening.

"The fragment," Ace said. "You know what it is."

"I know what it isn't. It isn't alive. It isn't a passenger. It isn't controlling you." Irkal walked toward her, slowly, carefully, like approaching a wounded animal. "It's a resonance. A memory. Something that died before it ever lived, and the memory of it stuck to you because you were in the same place at the same time. It attached to your grief. It grew with your guilt. It's part of you now."

"How do I get rid of it?"

"You don't." Irkal was close now. Close enough to touch. Her eyes were the eyes of someone who had seen too much and decided to keep seeing anyway. "And you shouldn't want to. It's kept you alive. It's kept you sharp. It's the only thing that's ever made you feel like you're not completely alone in your own head."

Ace's throat was tight.

"You don't know what it does."

"I know exactly what it does. I've seen it in others." Irkal reached out. Slowly, giving Ace time to pull away. And put her hand on Ace's shoulder. Her hand was warm. Calloused. The hand of a healer. "When the guilt gets too heavy, it takes over. When you feel responsible for something you couldn't control, it comes forward. It's not trying to hurt you. It's trying to protect you. It's just not very good at knowing when protection becomes destruction."

Ace wanted to pull away.

She didn't.

Behind Irkal, the pattern on the floor was glowing. A new figure was forming at its center. Not fully solid, not fully present, but there. A girl. Young. Dark hair. Her mother's eyes.

Celeste.

Ace's vision blurred. She blinked, and the blur resolved into tears she hadn't decided to shed.

"She looks like her," Ace said. Her voice was wrong. Too many words again. "She looks like she could be..."

"She's not," Irkal said. "But she could have been. You could have been. Everyone who dies too young could have been someone else's child, someone else's friend, someone else's..." She stopped. Took a breath. "She's not fully here. I can't bring her all the way. She's been dead too long, and what I did to call her back broke something. She's here, but she's not whole. She screams sometimes. In the dark. She doesn't remember what happened to her."

Ace watched the ghostly figure of Celeste shift in the candlelight. Watched her mouth open and close, like she was trying to speak but couldn't find the words. Or like she had too many words and couldn't organize them.

"Can you fix her?" Ace asked.

"No." Irkal's voice cracked on the word. "I've tried. I've spent seven years trying. I can call her back, but I can't make her remember. I can ask her questions, but I can't make her answer. She's trapped between being dead and being alive, and I did that to her. I wanted her to have justice so badly that I..." She stopped. "I became something she might not recognize."

Ace looked at the fragment of Celeste. At the way she flickered at the edges, like something being viewed through damaged glass. At the way Irkal's hand was still on her shoulder, steady and warm.

"You didn't become anything," Ace said quietly. "You became what you had to become. There's no other option when the system fails."

"Is that what happened to you?"

Ace thought about the village. The fire. The Blood-Moon Rift Event that had destroyed everything she'd known and left her with a fragment of something that had never lived and a guilt she couldn't name. She thought about Foundation teams that had found her in the rubble and told her she was special. She thought about Dr. Bright, who had looked at her like she was a problem to be contained rather than a person to be helped.

She thought about Mai, who had seen her at her worst and stayed anyway.

She thought about Shammy, who had called her the blade and meant it as a compliment.

She thought about Violet, which was not a passenger and not a parasite and not a friend but was somehow the closest thing she had to company in her own head.

"Yeah," she said. "Something like that."

The candles flickered. The pattern on the floor began to fade. Celeste's ghostly form started to dissolve at the edges, sliding back into whatever between-place she'd been pulled from.

"Mama," Celeste said. Or whispered. Or somehow communicated in a way that didn't require sound. "Mama, it hurts."

Irkal closed her eyes.

"I know, baby. I know. I'm sorry."

Ace watched as the girl faded. Watched as Irkal's composure cracked and reformed and cracked again. Watched as the fragment of Violet settled back into something that felt almost peaceful inside her chest.

Then she did something she almost never did.

She put her arms around Irkal.

Irkal stiffened. The reaction of someone who had learned not to accept comfort because comfort meant vulnerability and vulnerability meant risk. Then she collapsed into the embrace, and she was crying, and her body was shaking with the kind of grief that had been held too long and was finally finding release.

Ace held her. She didn't say anything. She didn't try to explain or fix or analyze. She just stood in the candlelit church and held a grieving mother while the daughter she couldn't save flickered and faded and disappeared.

When it was over, Irkal pulled back. Wiped her face with the back of her hand. Looked at Ace with eyes that were red-rimmed and exhausted and somehow clearer than they'd been before.

"You're not here to stop me," she said.

"No."

"You're not here to kill me."

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

Ace thought about the question. Really thought about it, beyond the mission parameters, beyond the Foundation briefing, beyond the tactical assessments Mai was always running. She thought about what had brought her to this church, to this woman, to this moment.

"Because you're the first person I've met who understands what I'm carrying," she said. "And because I think you're doing something that needs to be done. Even if it's wrong. Even if it costs you."

"Will you help me?"

Ace looked at the fading pattern on the floor. At the candles that were burning down to nothing. At the woman who had broken every rule of nature and civilization to give her murdered daughter a voice.

"I'll help you find justice," she said. "I can't promise what comes after."

Irkal nodded. It was enough.

Ace walked back to the borrowed house as the sky began to lighten. Violet was quiet inside her. Not dormant, never dormant, but quiet. Resting. Like it had seen something it recognized and had decided to wait.

Inside the house, Mai was awake. Sitting on the edge of her bed, tablet in her lap, reading something. She looked up when Ace came in.

"You were gone," she said. Her voice was carefully neutral.

"Irkal."

"I know. I felt you leave. I didn't follow because..." She stopped. Started again. "Because I thought you needed to go alone."

Ace sat down on her own bed.

"I met her daughter. The partial raise. She's not whole. She's been broken by what Irkal did to call her back."

Mai was quiet for a moment.

Then: "Irkal's methods are hurting people. Even the people she's trying to help."

"I know." Ace looked at her hands. "But the alternative is Reyes. Reyes is the one who's really hurting people. Irkal's just trying to fix what he broke."

"And if fixing what he broke means Irkal becomes something worse?"

Ace looked up.

"Then I'll stop her. But I don't think she will. I think she just wants Celeste to have justice. And I think..." She paused. "I think I want that too."

Mai set down her tablet.

"Then we help her. But we do it our way. We document everything. We build a case that can't be buried. And when it's over, we make sure she has a choice about what happens next."

Ace nodded.

It was enough.

Somewhere in Santero, in a church with a blue dome, Irkal was watching the dawn come. And in the ground around her, the dead were waiting.

They weren't waiting anymore.

End of chapter. Word count: ~4,150

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