

## CHAPTER 3 — Three-Vector Test

They didn't go straight into Detroit.

The Foundation never did. It always built a corridor between the idea and the action, padded with procedures and tests and the kind of bureaucratic gravity that made even monsters feel paperwork fatigue.

So they walked the triad through a "controlled environment." That was the phrase on the badge of the technician who escorted them. Controlled environment. Like the building itself could control anything at all.

The corridor ended at a thick door with a panel beside it. A biometric scan. A keycard. A code. Then another code because the Foundation was terrified of its own locks.

Inside was a chamber that looked like a server room built by someone who'd heard rumors about magic and hated them. Black racks. Cables. Sensors. A ring of cameras aimed inward at a central platform holding a containment unit the size of a suitcase.

Gears stood behind a console. Bright leaned against the wall as if he didn't care, which meant he cared enough to look casual.

"This is not a weapon," Gears said.

Mai's eyes flicked over the equipment. "It never is. Until it is."

Bright's mouth curved. "You're going to do great here."

Ace's gaze locked on the containment unit.

She felt it.

Not danger.

Not exactly.

A resonance. A hum beneath the audible spectrum. It tugged at Violet like a hook tugging at an old scar.

Mai stepped closer to the console. "What is it?"

Gears hesitated, which for him was a confession.

"A residual echo," he said. "Unassigned. Unnamed. It appeared after a recent containment failure in an unrelated sector. It should be inert. It is not."

Shammy's head tilted. The air around her shifted, tasting the room. "It is... angry."

Bright corrected gently. "It's hungry. Different problem."

Ace's fingers flexed near the hilt of a katana that wasn't in her hands. Her body wanted to move.

Mai noticed immediately. "Ace."

Ace didn't answer. Violet pressed behind her eyes, shimmering purple-green at the edges of vision.

Gears's voice remained level. "We are not requesting engagement. We are observing your proximity response. Stand at the marked line."

A line on the floor. Yellow again. The Foundation loved lines.

Ace stepped up to it. Mai followed, close. Shammy approached last, and the room's air changed as she moved, like the chamber had gained a new weather pattern.

For three seconds, nothing happened.

Then the containment unit clicked.

Not physically. Not a latch. Something else. A sound in the bones.

The lights flickered.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "That wasn't in your description."

Gears's fingers moved across his console. "Unexpected output."

Bright muttered, almost fondly, "That's our brand."

The chamber's air thickened.

Ace felt it like pressure on her sternum. A memory she didn't own tried to unfold in her throat—blood, chanting, the sensation of being named by something that didn't speak in words.

Violet rose.

Not fully. Not possession. But enough to make Ace's pupils flash with prismatic undertone.

The containment unit's hum climbed. A whisper threaded through the sound, a half-audible suggestion that identity was a door you could open from the outside.

Mai's hand shot out—she didn't grab Ace, she simply touched the inside of Ace's wrist, right where pulse lived.

"Ace," Mai said again, low. "Stay with me."

Ace's jaw clenched. Her breath went shallow.

The lights dimmed further. The cameras' red indicators blinked like eyes.

Shammy stepped forward, and for the first time in the Foundation's immaculate chamber, the air behaved like air again.

It moved.

Not violently. Not as a gust. As a correction. A subtle shift in pressure that disrupted the chamber's thickening resonance the way a hand disrupts smoke.

The containment unit's hum stuttered.

Gears looked up sharply. "Interesting."

Bright's eyebrows rose. "That's one word for it."

Mai's gaze flicked to Shammy, then back to Ace. "Ace. Breathe."

Ace tried.

The whisper in the bones pushed harder, trying to slip between breath and thought.

Violet surged, annoyed.

Ace's hand reached for nothing, for a blade that wasn't drawn.

"Don't," Mai said. "Not yet."

Ace's shoulders trembled once.

Shammy's voice came soft, almost intimate—not flirtation, not romance. Something older. Something elemental.

"Little shadow," Shammy murmured. "You don't have to bite the lightning. Let it pass around you."

Ace's breath caught.

And then it did.

The pressure shifted again—Shammy's atmospheric vector rising like a pillar, giving the resonance somewhere else to go. Mai's steady presence held Ace's center. Ace's own depth stopped collapsing inward and instead... held.

Three vectors.

The containment unit's hum fell back to baseline. The lights steadied. The whisper snapped like a thread cut with a clean blade.

Ace exhaled, ragged.

Mai didn't let go of her wrist until Ace's pulse slowed.

Bright pushed off the wall. The humor had drained from him for a moment, replaced by something like relief. "Well," he said quietly, "that answered a question."

Gears's eyes remained calm but sharper. "Yes."

Mai looked at them both. "What question?"

Gears spoke like he was stating a measurement, not a revelation.

"Whether two would have survived that."

Mai's throat tightened. She didn't look away from Ace. "Would we?"

Gears paused. Again, a confession.

“Not reliably,” he said.

Ace’s eyes remained violet, a little too bright.

Violet, inside her, settled back like an animal disappointed it hadn’t been fed.

Shammy stepped back from the line and sat her weight carefully, as if she feared breaking the room.

Mai’s hand finally dropped from Ace’s wrist.

Ace turned her head slightly toward Shammy and gave the smallest nod again.

Not gratitude.

Recognition.

Bright exhaled. “Okay,” he said, and his voice returned to its usual half-sarcastic cadence. “Now we can talk about Detroit without it sounding like I’m trying to kill you.” —

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