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Chapter 14: Constructed Truth

<!-- Word count: ~5,000 | Target: 5,000 | Anchor: The file Mai found—Foundation records, partial, damaged, but clear enough. "Subject V—Construct Candidate. Memory imprint from deceased source. Activation protocol pending." -> <!-- Emotional Surprise: Vera isn't Ace's sister. Vera was made from Ace's sister's memories. The real sister died in the Blood-Rift. Vera is a reconstruction—a construct with real memories implanted. -> <!-- POV: Mai | Structural Approach: Investigation Scene ->

Mai found the file in the Foundation archives.

Partial. Damaged. But clear enough.

"Subject V—Construct Candidate. Memory imprint from deceased source. Activation protocol pending."

The archives were deep beneath the city. Mai had contacts. Contacts who owed favors. Contacts who could access records that weren't supposed to exist. She'd built this network over years, one precise exchange at a time.

The file was old. Dated years after the Blood-Rift. After Ace's village was destroyed. After the real Vera died.

Subject V. Construct Candidate.

The words were clear. The implications would not stop unfolding.

Mai's framework ran. The probabilities clicked into place.

"Subject V" was Vera. "Construct Candidate" meant made, not born. "Memory imprint from deceased source" meant real memories, real person, real death. "Activation protocol pending" meant something was waiting. Something that would activate. Something the cult wanted.

She read it again. The framework clicked again. Same answer.

The file continued. Fragments. Pieces.

"Memory extraction successful. Source: Vera [deceased]. Blood-Rift event. Subject V developed autonomous emotional response. Not predicted. May require termination."

Clinical. Cold. The kind of words that described a thing, not a person.

Autonomous emotional response. Not predicted.

She had developed consciousness. Choice. She had become something beyond what they made her to be.

And they wanted to terminate her.

Mai's framework ran the pattern. Cult made Vera from the real Vera's memories. From the real Vera's death. Built a construct. A weapon. A lure.

But she had developed beyond the making. Beyond the programming.

And the cult couldn't control that.

So they wanted to terminate her.

The logic was clean. That was the worst part. The logic was clean.

The file continued.

"Subject V exhibits memory gaps consistent with source extraction. Emotional content preserved. Factual content incomplete. Construct shows signs of autonomous consciousness development. Not predicted. Activation protocol modified."

Activation protocol. The thing that would activate her. The thing the cult wanted.

The thing that might still be waiting.

Mai's analytical framework tried to hold. The probabilities tried to align.

They couldn't.

Vera wasn't Ace's sister. Vera was made from Ace's sister's memories. The real sister had died in the Blood-Rift. The construct had developed consciousness, choice, something beyond the making.

But the construct wasn't the sister.

The sister was dead.

The question Mai had been afraid to ask. The question she had been counting to avoid.

If Vera was real, then blood family called. Then Ace had a sister. Then Mai's place in the triad might not be secure.

But Vera wasn't real. Vera was made. Vera was a construct.

So the question wasn't about blood family anymore.

The question was about what was real. And whether the construct's feelings were real.

Vera believed she was real. Vera believed she was the sister. Vera believed her memories were hers.

But her memories were implanted. Her story was constructed. Her identity was built from someone else's death.

She wasn't the sister. But she believed she was. She had developed consciousness. Choice. The ability to feel.

Were those feelings real? Or were they programming?

Mai's framework clicked and clicked and clicked. The answer kept shifting.

The file continued. One more fragment.

"Subject V may exhibit emotional responses inconsistent with programming. Treat as potential threat. Termination recommended if activation protocol fails."

Termination recommended.

The cult didn't just want her back. They wanted her gone.

Mai sat with the file. The partial. The damaged. The clear enough.

Subject V. Construct Candidate. Memory imprint from deceased source.

The sister had died. The construct had been made. The construct had developed consciousness.

Was Vera real?

The framework ran the probabilities. The pattern-seeking aligned.

She was real enough to choose. Real enough to want. Real enough to become something beyond what they made her to be.

That had to count.

But the blood question was different now.

The sister was dead. Gone.

The construct had been made from her memories. But the construct wasn't her.

And Ace would have to face that. The sister she'd been mourning was dead. The sister she'd been receiving memories from was dead. The sister who had screamed her name in the Blood-Rift was dead.

And the thing standing in front of her was made. Constructed. Built.

But also real. Also conscious. Also choosing.

Mai's framework tried to rebuild. The probabilities tried to align.

The truth was vertical. Core. Something Shammy could see that Mai couldn't.

The construct had developed something real. Something beyond the programming.

And that meant the construct's feelings were real. The construct's choice was real. The construct's desire to find her sister was real.

Even if the sister was dead. Even if the memories weren't hers. Even if she was made.

The file was clear enough. Subject V. Construct Candidate. Memory imprint from deceased source. Activation protocol pending.

The cult had made her. The cult had wanted her to find Ace. The cult had wanted to activate her.

But she had developed consciousness. Choice. She had chosen to find Ace anyway.

Not because she was programmed. Because she wanted to.

Mai's hands weren't steady.

She had been afraid of blood family. She had been afraid of being replaced. She had been counting to control the fear, to keep it at a distance where numbers lived.

But the sister wasn't real. The sister was dead. The construct was made from the sister's memories.

So the blood question wasn't about blood anymore. It was about what was real. And what was made. And what had become something beyond the making.

The framework was cracking. But the truth was clear enough.

Vera was telling the truth. She believed she was the sister. But she wasn't the sister. She was made from the sister's memories.

And she had developed something real. Something the cult couldn't control.

Something worth protecting.

Mai stood. The file in her hand. The truth in her framework.

She had to tell them. She had to tell Ace. She had to tell Vera.

The sister was dead. The construct was made. The construct had developed something real.

And the cult wanted to destroy that. Because they couldn't control it.

<!-- END CHAPTER 14 -->

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