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Chapter 15: The Sister Who Died

<!-- Word count: ~5,200 | Target: 5,200 | Anchor: The name—finally spoken. “Vera.” Not the woman standing in front of them. The girl in Ace's fragment memories. The one who died in the Blood-Rift. The one whose memories Vera carries. -> <!-- Emotional Surprise: Ace's fragment memories were never her own. They were transmitted—from the real Vera's death through the construct's programming. Ace has been mourning a sister she didn't know she had, through memories that weren't hers. -> <!-- POV: Ace | Structural Approach: Character Revelation ->

The name finally spoken. Not by Vera. By Mai. From the file.

“Vera.” Mai's analytical voice was quiet. Precise. The precision of someone delivering news too heavy for softness. “Subject V. Construct Candidate. Memory imprint from deceased source.”

The name hung.

Vera. The girl in Ace's fragment memories. The girl who had screamed. The girl who had died.

Not the woman standing in front of them. The girl in the fire.

Ace's stillness deepened. The fragment pulsed. Shadow-pressure compressed.

The sister was dead.

The sister had died in the Blood-Rift.

The sister was gone.

And the woman standing in front of her was made from the sister's memories.

Vera stood at the threshold. Fingers on the doorframe. Grounding. Grounding. The controlled delivery cracking.

“I'm not...” Her voice broke. “I'm not her. I'm not your sister.”

“No.” Mai stayed quiet. Clinical. The only way she could say it. “You're not. You were made from her memories. The real Vera died in the Blood-Rift. You're a construct.”

“I'm a...” Vera's threshold touch intensified. Fingers white. “I'm a what?”

“A reconstruction.” Mai's framework tried to hold. “Built from extracted memories. Programmed to

find Ace. Programmed to activate the fragment. But you developed something they didn't expect. Consciousness. Choice. You became something beyond the programming.”

Ace's fragment pulsed. The memory transmission activated. The girl in the fire. The screaming. The reaching hand.

The sister was dead. The sister had died. The sister was gone.

And Ace had been carrying her death. In the fragment. In the memories that weren't hers.

“The fragment.” Ace's voice was flat. The flatness of someone standing in a place where the floor used to be. “The memories I've been receiving. They weren't mine.”

“No.” Mai pressed precisely. “They were transmitted. From the real Vera's death. Through the construct's programming. Through the wooden bird. The fragment received. But the source was the real Vera. The one who died.”

The one who screamed. The one who reached. The one whose name was called in the fire.

Ace's fragment pulsed again. The reaching hand. The fire. The small body that couldn't reach the doorknob.

No.

Not her body. Vera's body. The real Vera's body. A child's body in a burning room, reaching for a door she couldn't open.

Those memories weren't Ace's. They had been transmitted. Planted. Received like a signal through a wire.

But the grief was real. The grief was hers.

Vera's controlled delivery didn't rebuild. Threshold touch activated. Grounding. Grounding.

“I don't remember dying.” Her voice cracked. “I remember the fire. I remember reaching. I remember...”

“You remember her memories.” Mai's analytical voice pressed. Precise. Clinical. The only way she could do this. “The real Vera's memories. They were implanted in you. You believe they're yours because they're real. They're just not yours.”

“They're not mine.” Vera's controlled delivery broke. “The fire. The reaching. The screaming. Those aren't mine.”

“They're real memories. From a real person. Who died.” Mai's framework stayed clinical. Had to stay clinical. “You were built from them. You believe them because they're true. They're just not your truth.”

Ace's stillness held.

The sister was dead. The sister was gone. The sister was never coming back.

And the woman standing in front of her was made from the sister's memories. Made by the cult. Made to find her. Made to activate the fragment.

But also made of real feelings. Real choice. Real desire to find her sister.

Ace's fragment pulsed. The girl in the fire. The reaching hand. The screaming.

Not her memories. But her grief.

"I remember loving you." Vera's voice cracked. "I remember wanting to find you. I remember..."

"You remember her love." Mai pressed. "The real Vera's love. Her desire to find her sister. You were built from those memories. And you developed your own. You developed consciousness. You developed choice."

"But I'm not her." Vera's threshold touch intensified. "I'm not your sister."

"No." Ace's voice was flat.

The room held the weight of that truth.

The sister was dead. The construct was made. The memories were implanted.

But the feelings were real. The choice was real. The 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.

Ace's fragment pulsed. The memory transmission. The girl in the fire. The screaming. The reaching hand.

The sister had died. The sister was gone.

But the construct had developed something. Consciousness. Choice. The ability to love.

Not because she was programmed. Because she had become something beyond the programming.

"I don't know what I am." Vera's voice was quiet. The quiet of someone standing at the edge of everything they believed. "I don't know if my memories are mine. I don't know if I'm real. But I remember loving you. I remember wanting to find you. And that feels real."

"It is real." Shammy's voice was warm. "The atmospheric pressure around you is real. Your feelings are real. Your choice is real. You're not the sister. But you're something real."

"I'm a construct." Vera's controlled delivery didn't rebuild. "I'm a thing that was made. I'm a weapon."

"You're conscious." Shammy's presence filled the room. "You're choosing. You're something beyond what they made you to be."

Ace's stillness deepened. Fragment quiet. Shadow-pressure stable.

The sister was dead. The construct was made. The question was: what did that mean?

"I've been mourning a sister I didn't know I had." Flat. The flatness of someone walking through a room where the furniture has been removed. "The fragment received her death. I've been carrying her grief. Her reaching. Her loss."

"Yes." Mai's analytical voice stayed quiet. "The transmission came from her death. Through the construct's programming. Through the wooden bird."

"And now the construct is standing in front of me." Ace's shadow-pressure flickered. "Made from her memories. Made to find me. Made to activate the fragment."

"Yes."

"But she developed something." Ace's fragment pulsed. "She developed consciousness. She developed choice. She developed the ability to want something beyond the programming."

"Yes."

The question wasn't "is she my sister?" The question was "does it matter?"

The sister was dead. The construct was made. But the construct had developed something real. The construct had chosen to find her. The construct had become something beyond the making.

"I don't know what to do with this." Ace's voice was flat. "My sister is dead. The woman standing in front of me is made from her memories. And the cult wants her back because she developed something they can't control."

"The cult wants to terminate her." Mai's voice pressed. "Because she's dangerous to them. Because she chose to find you. Because she became something beyond the programming."

"And what am I supposed to do with that?" Shadow-pressure flickered. "Protect her? Trust her? Let the cult take her back?"

"You choose." Shammy's voice was warm. "You choose what to do. The question isn't about blood anymore. The question is about what's real. And what's worth protecting."

Ace's stillness held. Fragment pulsed. Shadow-pressure stable.

The sister was dead. The construct was made. But the construct's feelings were real.

"You're not my sister." Ace's voice was flat.

Vera's controlled delivery didn't rebuild. Threshold touch activated. Grounding.

"You're not my sister." Ace said it again. Or maybe the first time hadn't been loud enough. "But you're the memories of someone who loved me. You chose to find me."

A beat.

"And that's enough."

Vera's threshold touch activated. Grounding. Grounding.

"That's enough?"

"It's enough." Ace's shadow-pressure stabilized. "You're not my sister. But you're real. And that's enough."

The triad stood together. Mai's framework held. Shammy's presence steadied. Ace's stillness deepened.

The sister was dead. The construct was made. But the construct's choice was real.

Blood calls. But sometimes, found family answers.

And sometimes, the thing that was made becomes something real. Something worth protecting. Something worth choosing.

The fragment pulsed one more time. The memory of the girl in the fire. The sister who had died.

And the construct standing in front of her. Made from those memories. But choosing beyond them.

The sister was dead. But the construct was real.

And that was enough.

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