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Chapter 1: The Letter Arrives

<!-- Word count: ~4,500 | Target: 4,500 | Anchor: The letter in Ace's hands, edges softening where her thumb traces the fold | Structural: Environmental Scene ->

The letter arrived on a Tuesday, which was wrong for two reasons.

First, nothing arrived on Tuesdays. Mai had arranged their receiving schedule specifically to avoid unexpected deliveries. The courier services came on Thursdays. Foundation drop-offs on Fridays. Even the occasional freelance request knew to wait until the designated window.

Second, the handwriting on the envelope made Ace go still.

Not quiet. Still.

Mai looked up from her coffee. Three spoons of grounds per cup, measured exactly, the way she counted things when she needed her hands busy while her mind worked. The stillness in the room had a quality she'd learned to read over years of sharing space with Ace.

This wasn't patience. This was recognition.

Ace stood at the window, the envelope in her hands. Morning light cut through the harbor district's perpetual haze, catching the paper's edge. Water-damaged. The ink bled blue at the corners. The handwriting sloped wrong, like someone who'd learned to write in a different position than most people. Hand tilted, paper angled, pressure uneven.

What most people noticed first about Ace was the stillness. The way she held space like a held breath. But what Mai had learned to see, what took years, was how small she was. Compact. Pressure-light. Even standing, she seemed to take up less room than her body should need. 120 centimeters of shadow and stillness, Mai had calculated once, half-curious, half-wondering if Ace knew she'd done it.

Small enough that Mai sometimes forgot. Until Ace stood beside her and the top of that dark head barely reached her shoulder.

Small enough to slip through spaces others couldn't. To disappear into shadows like they were home.

Small enough that finding her sister's body had been the kind of task that required crawling, not walking.

Mai didn't know this yet. But she was learning to read the stillness, and the stillness was saying something.

"Where did it come from?"

Ace didn't turn. "Window."

"That's not an answer."

"I know."

The window. Mai had checked the perimeter herself this morning. All three exits accounted for, the receiving slot sealed, the delivery point inactive. No one should have been able to approach without tripping at least one of her sensors.

She crossed to Ace's side. The envelope was ordinary paper, standard weight, standard size, the kind you could buy at any supply store in any of the six districts. But the paper itself was wrong for the writing. Cheap paper, careful handwriting. Someone who couldn't afford good materials but took meticulous care with what they had.

Or someone who wanted to look like they couldn't.

Shammy appeared in the doorway. Mai hadn't heard her approach, never did, but the atmospheric pressure in the room shifted the way it always did when Shammy entered a space. Storm weather. Pressure dropping before rain.

At 195 centimeters, Shammy moved through the world like weather. Present before she was seen, her tall frame ducking slightly under standard doorframes, her presence filling more space than her body should occupy. The triad was a study in contrasts. Shammy, who took up too much room. Mai at medium height with her precise angles and measured steps. And Ace, who took up less space than seemed possible. A depth vector that compressed. A shadow that fit into gaps others couldn't follow.

"Someone was here." Shammy's voice was warm, the way it always was, but her eyes were on the window, not the letter. "Recently. Someone who doesn't belong."

Mai's fingers had already begun their counting rhythm. One. Two. Three. The taps were unconscious, a pattern she'd never managed to break. The echo of a phone ringing seventeen times in an empty room years ago. She stopped the motion.

"When?"

"I don't know." Shammy moved closer, her presence a weather system occupying more space than her body should. "The residue is faint. An hour? Two?"

"Show me."

Shammy's hand touched the windowsill. Her fingers hovered above the wood. Not quite touching. Reading. Mai had never fully understood how Shammy's perception worked, something about atmospheric displacement, pressure changes, the way air moved around a person who'd been in a space. But the results were reliable enough that Mai had stopped questioning the method.

"Female. Tall. My height, maybe taller. Light step." Shammy's brow furrowed. "She didn't enter. She reached through. Just her arm. Just enough to leave something."

"A courier."

"Maybe." Shammy pulled back. "Or someone who knew better than to cross the threshold."

Ace hadn't moved. Still holding the envelope. Still staring at the paper like it contained something more than words. Her shadow-pressure flickered at her edges. Mai caught the emerald glow, subtle,

the way it always appeared when something affected Ace before her face could show it.

Mai reached for it. "May I?"

Ace's grip tightened. For a moment, Mai thought she wouldn't let go.

Then her fingers loosened. She handed it over without a word.

The envelope opened easily. Standard seal, standard fold. Inside, a single sheet of the same cheap paper, the same careful handwriting.

Your sister survived the Blood-Rift. I need to find you before they do.

No signature. No return address. No indication of who "they" were.

Mai read it twice. Then a third time, because that was what she did. Read, analyze, look for patterns. The handwriting was steady, controlled. No tremors, no hesitation marks. Whoever had written it had been calm. Composed. Sure of what they were saying.

"Your sister." Mai kept her voice level. Analytical. "You don't have a sister."

Ace's stillness hadn't broken. "No."

"The Blood-Rift destroyed your village. You were the only survivor they found."

"I know."

"So either this is a trap, or—"

"Or."

The word hung in the air. Incomplete. Not a contradiction. Not an agreement. Just a word that contained everything she wasn't saying.

Mai looked at the paper again. The ink was standard, blue-black, the kind any clerk used. The handwriting was the anomaly. Handwriting was like a fingerprint. You could change your voice, your face, your walk. But handwriting came from the shoulder, the wrist, the angle of the body against the desk. Muscle memory encoded in ink.

This handwriting was familiar.

Not because Mai had seen it before.

Because it matched.

She crossed to the archive cabinet. The Foundation required them to keep records, identification documents, mission reports, personnel files. She pulled Ace's original intake file. The forms were old, the paper yellowing at the edges. Foundation intake forms, filled out by whoever had found Ace after the Blood-Rift.

The handwriting on those forms was administrative. Clinical. The kind of writing done by someone filling out paperwork for the hundredth time.

But at the bottom of the last page, there was a note. A small notation, almost an afterthought, in

different handwriting:

Subject demonstrates no memory of prior identity. Recommend observation period before field assignment.

The handwriting matched.

Not exactly. Close. The kind of close that came from two people learning to write in the same place, at the same time, from the same teacher.

The kind of close that came from family.

Mai counted the steps back to Ace. Four. One for each corner of the room. "Someone had access to your intake file. Someone who wrote a note on it. Someone who wrote like—" She stopped. "Like someone who grew up with you."

Ace's stillness cracked.

Just for a moment her hand moved, toward the paper, toward Mai, toward something she couldn't name.

Then it stopped. The stillness returned. Deeper than before.

"Let me see."

Mai handed her the file. Ace's eyes moved across the handwriting, the signature, the date. Her thumb traced the edge of the paper. Softening it. Wearing it down.

The smell came without warning.

Burning hair. Heat. Something screaming.

Ace's hand spasmed. The file slipped and she caught it, barely, but her eyes had gone somewhere else. Somewhere far. Somewhere that smelled like smoke and sounded like a voice she didn't know, screaming a name that might have been Vera.

Then it passed. The smell. The sound. The voice. All of it gone, like it had never been there.

Mai had seen this before. The fragment memories, Ace called them, though she never talked about what they contained. They came without warning. Left without explanation. Mai had learned to wait them out.

"Someone was in your village." Mai's voice was careful. Measured. She was analyzing, not reacting. That was how she worked. "Someone who survived. Someone who's been looking for you."

"Or someone who wants me to think that." Ace's voice was steady again. The stillness was back in place, the moment passed. "A trap. A lure. Something to draw me out."

"Maybe." Mai took the file back, the letter, the envelope. Laid them out on the table in the pattern she always used, evidence in a row, connections to be drawn. "But the handwriting matches. And someone knew how to bypass my receiving schedule. Someone knew where we are. That's either a very sophisticated trap, or—"

"Or."

There it was again. That word. That single syllable.

Shammy had moved to the window. Her hand hovered near the sill, not touching. Reading the residue of the person who'd been there. "She came alone. She knew we'd find her trace. She wanted us to know she could reach us."

"A message."

"Or an invitation." Shammy's voice was thoughtful. The storm in her had settled into something watchful. Waiting. "Someone who wants to be found. But only by us."

Mai's fingers had started counting again. One. Two. Three. She stopped herself. "There are three possibilities. One: this is a trap, designed to lure you into exposing yourself. Two: this is an actual survivor from your village, and the letter is genuine. Three: this is something we haven't considered yet."

"Those aren't mutually exclusive." Ace's voice was still flat. "A real survivor could be used as bait. A trap could be built around genuine information. The third option could be both."

Shammy turned from the window. "She'll come back. Whoever she is. She didn't leave the letter and disappear, she left a trace on purpose. She wants us to know she can reach us."

"Then we wait." Mai's voice was steady now. The analytical pattern forming, the threads connecting. "We analyze. We prepare. And when she makes contact again—"

"She."

Ace's voice wasn't flat anymore.

Sharp. Focused. The stillness had broken, and something else had taken its place. Something that looked almost like recognition.

"You said 'she.'"
Ace looked at the letter, the file, the envelope. Her hand was on the paper again, thumb tracing the fold. "You keep saying 'she.'"

"The handwriting." Mai gestured at the file. "The note on your intake. The letter. The same hand, or close to it. Someone who learned to write the way you did. A sibling would—"

"I don't have siblings."

Clear. Precise. Final.

But her hand hadn't left the paper. Her thumb kept moving across the fold, again and again. Softening the edge. Wearing it down.

"I know." Mai's voice was softer now. The analytical distance still there, but something else underneath. "But someone thinks you do."

Shammy had moved closer without Mai noticing. Her presence shifted the atmospheric pressure, grounding the room. She didn't speak, didn't need to. Her proximity was enough. The vertical vector, seeing what the horizontal couldn't. The depth vector, feeling what the analytical mind wouldn't.

Ace looked at the paper. The handwriting. The words that shouldn't exist, written in a hand that shouldn't match, delivered by someone who shouldn't have been able to reach them.

“Find her.”

Mai nodded. Already reaching for her equipment. Already counting the steps to the exit, the exits she'd need, the threads she'd have to pull.

But Ace hadn't moved. Still standing at the window, the letter in her hands, the edge of the paper softening where her thumb kept tracing the fold.

“Mai.”

Quiet. Steady.

But something underneath wasn't.

“What if she's real?”

Mai stopped. Her hand on her equipment, her mind on the analysis. The question wasn't analytical. It wasn't about the evidence, the patterns, the threads connecting one fact to another.

It was about something deeper.

“Then we'll deal with that.”

Ace turned. The stillness was there, but different now. Not recognition. Not the moment before something moves. This was something that had already started moving and couldn't be stopped.

“Find her,” Ace said again. “I need to know.”

The letter sat on the table. Water-damaged paper, bleeding ink, careful handwriting. *Your sister survived the Blood-Rift. I need to find you before they do.*

The words matched nothing Ace could remember. But her body remembered.

Her hands wouldn't stop shaking.

And she didn't know why.

Shammy was the first to leave.

Not because she didn't care. Because she cared in a different way. Mai had her equipment spread across the table, her analysis already beginning. Ace was still at the window, still holding the edge of the paper, still tracing the fold. But Shammy moved toward the door, her presence shifting the room's atmospheric pressure as she went. At her height, she barely fit in the doorway without ducking, a reminder that the world was built for shorter people and she moved through it like weather finding its level.

“I'll check the perimeter.” Her voice was warm. Light. “See if she left anything else.”

Mai nodded without looking up. Her fingers were already moving, pulling threads. The handwriting analysis. The paper composition. The delivery method. The receiving schedule that shouldn't have been bypassed.

Ace watched Shammy go. Then, finally, she let go of the paper.

“Mai.”

“What?”

“The letter. The handwriting.” Ace's voice was steady again. The stillness had settled into something colder. More controlled. “You said it matched. But you didn't say whose hand it was.”

Mai's counting had started again. One. Two. Three. She didn't stop it this time. “There's no record of your family. The Blood-Rift destroyed the village, and the Foundation found you three days later. No other survivors were identified. No other bodies were recovered.”

“So whose handwriting is it?”

Mai looked at the file. The note at the bottom. The small notation that shouldn't have meant anything.

“We don't know. The signature is illegible. The note is unsigned.” She stopped. “They were there. When you were found. They saw you. They knew who you were before.”

Before.

The word hung in the air. Before the Blood-Rift. Before the Foundation. Before everything Ace could remember.

Ace's hand had stopped shaking. The stillness was back, but it was different now. Not recognition. Not movement. Something Mai couldn't read.

“Find her.”

Mai nodded. She would find her. That was what she did, find patterns, pull threads, connect one fact to another until the picture emerged. She'd already started. The analysis forming, the steps counting themselves out in her mind.

But something else was counting too. Something underneath the analysis. Something that felt like the number seventeen, ringing in an empty room, over and over, until someone finally stopped answering.

What if she's real?

The question sat in the room, unanswered. Ace hadn't asked it again. Mai hadn't answered. But it was there. Underneath the analysis. Underneath the counting. Underneath the stillness that meant something was about to move.

What if she was real?

And what would that mean for the family Ace had chosen?

The room was quiet. The letter on the table. The handwriting matching nothing and everything. The smell of burning hair still lingering in Ace's memory, still waiting to be named.

Outside, Shammy moved through the perimeter, a weather system checking every corner, every

threshold, every place someone might have stood. The harbor district's morning light cut through the haze, casting long shadows that Shammy moved through like she was part of them.

Inside, Mai counted the exits. One. Two. Three. Four if she counted the window. Five if she counted the ventilation shaft.

And Ace stood at the center of the room. Still as the moment before a storm. Holding the edge of a paper that shouldn't exist, written by a hand she didn't know.

But her body knew.

Her hands wouldn't stop shaking. And somewhere underneath the stillness, something was moving. Something that smelled like burning hair and sounded like a scream and felt like a name she couldn't remember.

Vera.

The name surfaced without warning. A fragment memory. A voice calling out in the smoke. A hand reaching for something that wasn't there.

Ace didn't know where the name came from. She didn't know why her body recognized the handwriting. She didn't know why the smell of burning hair made her want to go still and never move again.

But she knew one thing.

Someone was looking for her. Someone who knew things they shouldn't. Someone who had survived something that shouldn't have had survivors.

And the stillness that had been her protection for years, that held her shape when the world tried to break it, was starting to crack.

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