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Chapter 2: Depth Vector

<!-- Word count: ~4,800 | Target: 4,800 | Anchor: Ace's dual katanas humming at the frequency of tension | Structural: Character Revelation -->

Night didn't exist for Ace.

She lay in the dark, but sleep never came. Just stillness. The kind that wasn't rest, the kind that waited. Her shadow-pressure pressed against her skin, visible at her edges in the dim light filtering through the window. The harbor district never went completely dark. Always something burning somewhere, something moving, something making noise.

She watched the ceiling.

The fragment memory had been coming more often since the letter. Not the burning hair. She'd had that one for years. New ones. A voice saying something she couldn't quite hear. A hand reaching for hers. A name surfacing without warning, like a bubble in deep water, breaking the surface and vanishing before she could catch it.

Vera.

She didn't know where the name came from. It didn't match anything. But her body knew it. Knew it the way her hands knew the weight of her katanas before she touched them. Knew it the way her shadow-pressure knew danger before her eyes saw it.

She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes.

The pressure helped. Sometimes.

At 120 centimeters, she fit into spaces others couldn't. Under tables. Behind walls. Into gaps that seemed too small for any adult to occupy. She'd learned to make herself small, smaller than small, long before she understood what small meant. Small meant safe. Small meant hidden. Small meant the violence that destroyed her village had passed over her like water parting around a stone.

Small meant she could fit through spaces the flames couldn't follow.

Small meant she could crawl to her sister's body and find the doorknob just out of reach.

She pressed harder. The pressure built. The memory tried to surface, the doorframe, the height she couldn't reach, the smoke that poured through the cracks, and she pushed it down.

Not yet. Not tonight.

Sleep came in fragments. A half-hour here. Twenty minutes there. The kind of sleep that didn't restore anything, just passed the time until morning.

When dawn crept through the window, Ace was already up. Already dressed. Already standing at the window where the letter had arrived, looking at the delivery slot that shouldn't have been accessible.

She didn't remember moving there. Her body had gone, and her mind had followed.

Mai was already at the table when Ace emerged. Papers spread in rows. Threads, Mai called them, the connections she pulled to make patterns visible. To Mai, the world was a web. Every touch rippled. Every thread led somewhere.

To Ace, the world was depth. What was underneath. What was hidden.

"I have three leads." Mai didn't look up. Her fingers moved across the papers, counting. One. Two. Three. "The paper composition suggests northern provinces. The ink is standard, but the handwriting pressure suggests someone who learned to write at an angle. Desk tilted, paper rotated. That's unusual for this region."

"Maybe."

"The delivery method suggests someone who knew our receiving schedule. That means Foundation access, or someone who's been watching us long enough to learn our patterns." Mai finally looked up. "Someone patient."

Ace said nothing. She moved to the window. The same window where the letter had arrived.

"Shammy found residue." Mai's voice was careful now. Measured. "Atmospheric trace. Whoever delivered the letter, they were here. They wanted us to know."

"Maybe."

"You keep saying that."

"It fits."

Mai's fingers stopped counting. She looked at Ace, really looked, the way she did when she was analyzing, pulling threads. "What aren't you saying?"

Ace turned from the window. The katanas at her hips hummed. Not drawn. Not needed. But humming. The frequency of tension that lived in her when something was wrong. The shadow-pressure at her edges flickered, visible in the morning light.

"I should go alone."

Mai's analytical distance cracked. Just for a moment. "What?"

"The investigation." Ace's voice was flat. Controlled. "I should do it alone."

"That's—" Mai stopped. Her fingers started counting again. One. Two. Three. "That's not how we work."

"I know."

"Then why would you—"

"Maybe I don't know."

The words hung between them. Ace didn't have an answer. She just had a pull. A depth-vector instinct that said: *Keep them away from this. Keep everyone away from this.* She didn't know why. The fragment didn't explain itself. It just pulled.

Shammy appeared in the doorway. Her presence shifted the room's atmospheric pressure, the way it always did. At her full height, she had to duck slightly to fit in the standard doorframe, a small accommodation she made without thinking, her body always aware of the space it occupied. She didn't speak, didn't need to. She moved to stand near Mai, her body a weather system that said nothing and everything.

"You're withdrawing." Shammy's voice was warm. "The storm is pulling back."

"I'm not withdrawing."

"Then what?" Mai's voice had an edge now. The analytical distance cracking. "You want to investigate alone. You won't say why. You keep saying 'maybe' like that's an answer."

Ace's stillness deepened.

"I don't know." The words came out harder than she meant. "I just know I should go alone."

Silence.

Shammy moved first. Not away. Toward. Her presence filled the space next to Ace, atmospheric pressure shifting, the way it did when she was trying to read something underneath. The vertical vector, looking for core truths.

"Something's wrong." Shammy's voice was quieter now. "Not wrong with the investigation. Wrong with you."

"I know."

"Is it the fragment?"

"Maybe."

"Is it the letter?"

Ace didn't answer. The stillness was back. Shadow-pressure flickered at her edges.

Shammy's hand moved. Not to touch, but to hover. Near Ace's shoulder. Near the space where her shadow-pressure lived. "The air's different around you. The pressure's wrong."

"I know."

"You keep saying that."

"It fits."

Mai had stood up from the table. Her counting had stopped. The analytical distance was gone, replaced by something Ace couldn't read. Something that looked almost like fear.

"You want to go alone." Mai's voice was careful. "Because you don't trust us with this."

"No."

"Then why—"

"I don't trust me."

The words came out before Ace could stop them. She hadn't meant to say them. Hadn't even known they were true until she heard them.

Mai's eyes widened. Shammy's presence shifted. Surprise. Recognition. Something deeper.

"What do you mean?" Mai's voice was soft now. The edge gone.

Ace's hand moved to her hip. To the katanas. To the hum that lived in them when something was wrong. "The fragment. It's been pulling since the letter. Like it knows something. Like it's trying to—" She stopped. "I don't know what it's trying to do."

"But you think it wants you alone." Mai was analyzing again. Pulling threads. "You think it's protecting something. Or hiding something."

"Maybe."

"From us?"

Ace's stillness was absolute now.

"Maybe."

The morning passed in fragments.

Mai spread her threads across the table. Names. Locations. Connections that might lead somewhere. Shammy moved through the space like weather, always present, always watching the exits. Ace stood at the window, her shadow-pressure pressing against her skin, her katanas humming at the frequency of something she couldn't name.

The pull was still there. The depth-vector instinct that said: *Keep them away*. But there was something else underneath it now. Something that felt like recognition.

What if she's real?

Mai's question from yesterday. Ace hadn't answered it. Hadn't been able to. Because the fragment didn't have answers. It had pulls. It had depths. It had instincts that surfaced without warning and left without explanation.

And underneath all of it was something she didn't want to look at. Something that smelled like burning hair and sounded like a voice screaming a name she couldn't remember.

Too short. The doorknob was too high. She stood on her toes and still couldn't reach.

She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes again. The pressure helped. Sometimes.

"Three locations." Mai's voice cut through the stillness. "The paper came from a supplier in the northern provinces. The handwriting matches no known database, but the style suggests formal education, someone who learned to write carefully, precisely. The delivery trace Shammy found leads toward the harbor district, but it fades before we can follow it."

"You want to go to the harbor."

"The trail is there. But it's cold." Mai's fingers counted. One. Two. Three. "We'd be guessing."

"Maybe."

"You keep saying that."

"It fits."

Mai's counting stopped. Her analytical distance cracked again, and something else came through. Something that looked almost like fear but wasn't. Almost like anger but wasn't.

"Ace."

The word was careful. Measured. Mai was pulling threads, even now. Even when she was trying not to.

"I know." Ace's voice was flat. "I know you want to help. I know you want to investigate. I know that's what you do, you pull threads until something unravels."

"Then let me."

"I can't."

"Why?"

Ace's stillness was absolute. The kind that meant something had already broken, and she was the only one who could feel it.

"Because if I'm wrong—" She stopped. The fragment pulled. The depth-vector instinct said: *Keep them away.* "If I'm wrong about this, I don't want you there."

"You don't want us there, or you don't want us to see?"

The question cut. Deeper than Mai knew. Deeper than Ace could explain.

Because the fragment didn't have words. It had pulls. And the pull right now was saying: *Keep them away. Keep everyone away. Don't let them see what's underneath.*

But underneath was something Ace didn't want to look at either.

Shammy found her in the training room.

Not training. Just standing. Her katanas drawn, but not moving. Just holding them. Feeling the hum of the shadow-pressure that lived in them when something was wrong.

"You're not practicing." Shammy's voice came from the doorway. "You're holding."

“Maybe.”

“The storm is inside you.” Shammy moved closer. Her presence shifted the atmospheric pressure, the way it always did. “You're not letting it out.”

“I know.”

“Why?”

Ace didn't answer. The katanas hummed. The shadow-pressure flickered at her edges. The fragment pulled.

“Because you're afraid.” Shammy's voice was warm. Not accusing. “You're afraid of what's underneath.”

“Maybe.”

“I can feel it.” Shammy moved closer. Not touching, never touching, not without permission. But present. “The pressure's wrong. The depth is wrong. Something's pulling you somewhere you don't want to go.”

Ace's grip tightened on the katanas. The hum intensified.

“I don't know what it is.” The words came out quiet. Hard. “I don't know why the fragment is pulling. I don't know why the letter made it worse. I just know—” She stopped. “I know I should go alone.”

“That's not how we work.”

“I know.”

“Then why?”

“Because—”

The fragment pulled. Hard. Something underneath. Something depth-vector. Something her conscious mind couldn't see.

“Because I don't trust what I'll do if you're there.”

Shammy's presence shifted. The atmospheric pressure changed. “You don't trust yourself.”

“No.”

“You never used to.”

The words hung between them. Ace's stillness was back. Something had already moved, and she couldn't stop it.

“I know.”

“Then why is this different?”

Ace's hands tightened on the katanas. The hum was louder now. Shadow-pressure visible at her edges, even in the dim light of the training room.

"Because this time, I might want to do it."

The words came out before she could stop them. She hadn't known they were true. Hadn't wanted to know. But there they were. The fragment pulling toward something. The depth-vector pointing somewhere. And underneath it all, something that looked almost like recognition.

Vera.

The name surfaced without warning. Again. Like a bubble in deep water.

"I don't know why." Ace's voice was hard now. Controlled. "I don't know what the fragment wants. I just know it's pulling. And I don't want you there when I find out what it's pulling toward."

Shammy was quiet. Her presence filled the space, but she didn't move closer. Didn't push.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay." Shammy's voice was warm. "We'll do it your way. For now."

Mai was counting again.

Ace could hear her from the other room. One. Two. Three. Four. The same pattern, over and over. The same thread-pulling, over and over.

She moved to the doorway. Mai looked up from her papers. Her fingers stopped counting.

"We'll investigate together." Mai's voice was careful. "But I want you to tell me if the fragment pulls. I want to know when it happens. What it feels like. What it makes you want to do."

"Maybe."

"Ace."

"I'll try."

"That's not a yes."

"It's what I have."

Mai's counting had started again. One. Two. Three. The analytical distance was back in place, but underneath it was something else. Something that looked almost like fear.

"Ace." Mai's voice was soft now. "What if she's real?"

The question from yesterday. The question Ace couldn't answer.

"What if she is?"

"Then she's your sister. Blood family. The thing you don't have."

The words hung in the air. Ace's stillness was back. The fragment pulled. The depth-vector pointed.

"I don't have blood family." Her voice was flat. "I have this."

She gestured at the room. At Mai. At Shammy in the doorway.

"I have you."

Mai's counting stopped. Her analytical distance cracked. Something else came through. Something that looked almost like fear but wasn't. Almost like hope but wasn't.

"That's not an answer."

"Maybe."

"It's not—"

"I know." Ace's voice was hard. Controlled. "I know what you're asking. I know what you're afraid of. I just—" She stopped. The fragment pulled. The depth-vector pointed. "I don't know what I'll do if she's real. I don't know what I'll do if she's not. I just know something's pulling. And I have to find out what it is."

Mai was quiet. Shammy was quiet. The room was quiet.

Then Mai nodded. Her counting started again. One. Two. Three. Four.

"Okay." Her voice was analytical again. Careful. "We'll find out together. But I need you to tell me when the fragment pulls. I need you to tell me what it makes you want to do."

"I'll try."

"That's not a yes."

"It's what I have."

Mai's counting continued. Shammy's presence shifted. And Ace stood at the center of the room, her katanas humming at the frequency of tension, her shadow-pressure flickering at her edges, her fragment pulling toward something she couldn't see.

The letter sat on the table. The handwriting matched nothing she could remember. But her body remembered. Her hands wouldn't stop shaking.

And somewhere underneath the stillness, something was pulling.

Find her, her fragment said. Find out what I am. Find out what you are.

And keep them away.

She didn't know why. She didn't know what the fragment wanted. She just knew that something was wrong. Something was pulling. And the stillness that had protected her for years was starting to crack.

Mai reached for her coat. Someone was going to have to investigate, and she knew exactly who it should be.

But Ace was already moving toward the door. Alone.

"Wait." Mai's voice cut through. "I said we'd do it together."

"I know."

"Then why are you—"

"Because I have to try." Ace's hand was on the door. Her shadow-pressure flickered. Her katanas hummed. "I have to try alone first. Just to see."

"Just to see what?"

"What the fragment does when you're not there."

Mai's counting stopped. "That's not—"

"I know." Ace's voice was hard. "I know it's not what we do. I know it's not how we work. But the fragment—" She stopped. "Something's wrong. Something's pulling. And I need to know if it's pulling toward her or away from you."

"Away from us?"

"Maybe." Ace's stillness was back. "I don't know. I just know I have to try."

She opened the door. The harbor district's morning light cut through, casting shadows across her face. For a moment, Mai could see the depth-vector in her. Shadow-pressure visible at her edges, the pull of something underneath. Small. Compact. A shadow that barely reached Mai's hip when she stood beside her.

Then she was gone.

And Mai was left counting. One. Two. Three. Four.

The numbers didn't help. The threads didn't connect. The pattern wasn't there yet.

But something else was. Something underneath the analysis. Something that looked almost like fear but wasn't.

What if she's real?

The question hung in the air, unanswered. The letter sat on the table. The handwriting matched nothing and everything.

And somewhere outside, Ace was walking toward something her fragment had been pulling toward since the moment she'd touched the paper.

Something her body recognized.

Something her mind couldn't see.

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