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Chapter 4: Vertical Truth

<!-- Word count: ~4,400 | Target: 4,400 | Anchor: Shammy's hand on Mai's shoulder—grounding pressure that asks nothing, says nothing, communicates everything about belonging. -> <!-- Emotional Surprise: Shammy doesn't feel threatened by the sister possibility. She feels excluded. -> <!-- POV: Shammy | Structural Approach: Quiet Character Moment ->

The night after the relay point, Shammy watched.

She always watched. It was what she did, observed the atmospheric pressure, the weight of the air, the way people moved through space. But tonight she was watching something specific. Or rather, someone.

Mai.

The analyst sat at the table, documents spread in front of her. Processing. Pattern-matching. Running scenarios. Shammy could feel the spike of anxiety in the air around her. The counting, the organizing, the framework Mai built to hold chaos at bay.

Shammy stood at the edge of the room. Near the door. Always near the door.

She didn't need to ask what was wrong. She could feel it. The pressure was wrong. Not Ace's pressure, that was still, contained, the kind of still that meant processing. Mai's pressure was different. Scattered. Like wind trying to find direction.

Shammy moved closer. Not to the table. Not to Mai directly. Just closer. Her presence shifted the atmospheric pressure in the room. Heavier. Steadier. Grounding.

Mai's fingers stopped tapping. She looked up.

"Thanks." The word was quiet. Almost not there.

Shammy nodded. She didn't need words. The storm inside her friend was visible. That was enough to know where to stand.

Ace was still. Lying on her side. Eyes open.

The fragment was quieter now. The smell of burning hair had faded. But something had changed. Shammy could feel it. The air around Ace was different. Compressed. Dense. Like pressure before a storm.

The letter was pressed against Ace's chest. Still there. Still soft from being held.

Shammy didn't ask about the letter. She didn't need to. She could feel the weight of it in the air. Not the paper itself. The meaning. The question that had arrived with it.

Blood.

Shammy didn't have blood. Not really. She'd happened. She was a phenomenon that became a person. The question of "where do I come from" was one she could never answer. Not in the way Ace could. Not in the way Mai could.

So when the letter arrived, claiming blood connection, Shammy felt something she didn't expect.

Not threat. Not jealousy.

Exclusion.

She stood at the threshold of the room. Watching. Ace was still. Mai was at the table. And Shammy was at the edge. Where she always was.

The air felt different when you were at the edge. Thinner. Colder. The warmth of the conversation didn't reach you.

At her height, 195 centimeters, the world was full of edges. Doorframes she had to duck under. Ceilings that pressed down. Rooms built for shorter bodies. She'd learned to move through the world like weather, finding the spaces where pressure felt right, avoiding the places where it didn't.

And she'd learned that some conversations had edges too. Invisible thresholds she couldn't cross. Questions that weren't for her.

The blood question was one of those.

Morning came. The investigation continued.

Mai had mapped three paths. The courier trail. The watcher's atmospheric residue. The letter's origin point. Three threads that might connect. Three patterns to follow.

"The letter's paper is northern province." Mai's voice was analytical. Framework in place. "If the sender wanted us to believe the sister story, they chose paper that would support it. Northern provinces are where the Blood-Rift happened."

"Where the village was." Ace's voice was flat. "Where the sister would be from. If she was real."

"Yes." Mai's fingers tapped the table. "But if the sender wanted to fake it, they'd know to use northern paper. The evidence could be authentic or constructed. We don't know yet."

"What do we know?" Shammy moved through the room. Always present. Always watching.

"That someone went to significant effort to make contact." Mai's pattern-seeking voice clicked into place. "A courier. A watcher. Paper from the right region. A name that triggered a fragment memory. All of it suggests intentionality. Someone wants Ace to know something. Or someone wants to lure Ace somewhere."

"Or both." Ace's shadow-pressure flickered. "A truth wrapped in a trap."

"Or a trap wrapped in a truth." Shammy's voice was warm. "Storms can look like rain from far away. Up close, you feel the wind."

Mai looked at Shammy. Something in her analytical framework shifted. Just slightly.

"You're right." Mai's fingers tapped. "We need to investigate all three threads. But we should consider: what does the sender want? And what do they think Ace will do?"

"They think she'll come looking." Ace's voice was flat. "They think the blood question will make her follow."

"Will it?"

Ace's hand pressed against her chest. The letter. The fragment. The past she couldn't remember.

"I don't know yet."

The room held the weight of that answer. Blood calling. The question that wasn't for Shammy. The door she couldn't walk through.

Shammy moved toward the edge of the room. Near the door. Where the air was thinner.

Night again. The investigation had yielded more questions than answers.

The courier trail led to a relay point that led to another relay point. The atmospheric residue faded before Shammy could trace it to source. The letter's origin remained obscured.

Mai sat at the table. Still processing. Still running scenarios. Her anxiety was a storm in the air. Shammy could feel it. The counting. The organizing. The framework trying to hold.

Shammy stood near the door. Watching.

"You're doing the thing." Mai's voice was quiet. Not analytical. Almost not there.

"What thing?"

"The door thing." Mai didn't look up from her documents. "Standing at the edge. Watching the exit. You've been doing it more since the letter arrived."

Shammy's presence shifted. The atmospheric pressure in the room changed. Heavier. Grounding.

"Storms move toward pressure changes." Shammy's voice was warm. "I'm just... watching where the wind blows."

"That's not an answer."

"No." Shammy moved closer. Her hand found Mai's shoulder. Grounding pressure. Not asking. Just being there. "It's not."

Mai's fingers stopped tapping. The framework cracked. Just slightly.

"What if she's real?"

The question hung in the air. Shammy could feel the weight of it. The anxiety. The fear underneath the analysis.

"If the sister is real?" Shammy's voice was calm. Warm. "Then blood calls. And Ace has to decide whether to answer."

"That's not—" Mai stopped. Her analytical voice faltered. "What if she answers? What if blood matters more than—"

"More than us?"

Mai didn't answer. But the air told Shammy everything. The spike of anxiety. The counting. The framework trying to hold something it couldn't hold.

Shammy's hand stayed on Mai's shoulder. Grounding. Steady.

"Blood calls." Shammy's voice was warm. "But found family answers. That's what you're afraid of. That Ace will answer blood. And you won't have a place in that conversation."

"I'm not—" Mai's analytical voice tried to rebuild. "I'm not afraid. I'm analyzing. The probability that—"

"You're counting." Shammy's hand pressed slightly. Grounding. "You're reorganizing. You're standing at the table running scenarios instead of sleeping. The air around you is scattered. That's not analysis. That's fear."

Mai's framework cracked. The counting stopped.

"What if she chooses blood?"

The question was quiet. Almost not there. The kind of question that comes out when the framework fails.

Shammy didn't answer immediately. She let the silence hold. Let the atmospheric pressure steady.

"Then she chooses blood." Shammy's voice was warm. Direct. "But that's not the question you're asking. You're asking if you'll have a place. If blood family means found family doesn't matter anymore."

"I'm asking—"

"You're asking if you're replaceable." Shammy's hand pressed on Mai's shoulder. Grounding. Present. "You're asking if the person you love will choose a ghost over the people who stood beside her."

Mai didn't speak. The counting didn't resume. The framework stayed cracked.

Shammy moved closer. Her presence shifted the room. Steadier. Heavier. Grounding.

"I don't have blood." Shammy's voice was calm. Warm. "I happened. I'm a phenomenon that became a person. I don't have a family that existed before. I have you. I have Ace. That's what I have."

She paused. The atmospheric pressure in the room shifted.

"When the letter arrived, I didn't feel threatened. I didn't feel like the sister was going to take my place." Shammy's voice was warm. But something underneath. Something heavy. "I felt excluded.

The question isn't for me. The blood question. The family question. I don't have blood. I don't have a place in that conversation."

Mai's framework stayed cracked. The analytical voice didn't rebuild.

"That's not—" Mai's voice was quiet. "That's not true. You have—"

"I have you." Shammy's hand pressed on Mai's shoulder. Grounding. "I have Ace. I have the triad. But when the letter arrived, everyone looked at Ace. And everyone looked at the blood question. And I stood at the edge of the room. Watching the door."

The silence held. Shammy could feel Mai's anxiety. The counting. The fear.

"You're counting rings." Shammy's voice was warm. "Seventeen of them. A phone that rang in an empty room. You're afraid you'll answer, and no one will be there. Or worse, you'll answer, and someone will tell you you're not enough."

Mai's fingers stopped. The counting had been visible. Shammy had felt it in the air.

"I'm not—"

"You are." Shammy moved closer. "And that's okay. Fear isn't wrong. It's just weather. It passes. Or it doesn't. But either way—"

Shammy's hand pressed on Mai's shoulder. Grounding. Steady.

"Either way, I'm here. The triad is here. Blood or no blood."

Mai's framework stayed cracked. The analytical voice didn't rebuild. But something shifted in the atmospheric pressure. The anxiety changed. Not gone, but different.

Held.

"What if she doesn't choose blood?" Mai's voice was quiet. "What if she chooses us, and the sister is real, and—"

"Then the sister joins." Shammy's voice was warm. "Or she doesn't. That's Ace's choice. Not yours. Not mine."

"What if—"

"What if the storm comes?" Shammy's voice was calm. "Then we stand in it. Together. That's what found family means. Not that the storm doesn't come. That you don't stand in it alone."

Mai's analytical framework finally rebuilt. The counting resumed. But the anxiety was different now. Held. Not solved, held.

"Thank you." Mai's voice was quiet. "For—"

"I know." Shammy's hand stayed on Mai's shoulder. "I know."

The next morning, Shammy stood at the edge of the room. Again. Near the door.

Ace was still. Processing. Mai was at the table. Running scenarios. The investigation would continue. Three threads. Three paths.

And Shammy would stand at the edge. Watching the door. Counting exits.

Not because she didn't belong. But because that's where the air was thinnest. That's where the storm pressure showed her what others couldn't see. At her height, she could see over the tops of doorframes, read the pressure in a room before anyone else felt it. But she still stood at the edges. Still watched the exits.

Old habits. Pre-personality habits. From when she was pressure seeking a boundary.

The atmospheric residue from the watcher was still there. Faint. But present. Shammy could feel it in the air. Something wrong at the edges. Something that didn't belong in the natural pressure system.

"The watcher's residue." Shammy's voice was warm. "It's still there. Faint. But I can feel it."

Mai looked up from her documents. "Can you trace it?"

"Not yet. It's too faded." Shammy's atmospheric sense extended. Feeling. "But it's moving. Something's coming. I can feel it in the pressure. The air's wrong."

"Wrong how?" Ace's voice was flat. Still. But present.

"Like before a storm." Shammy's presence shifted. "Charged. Waiting. Something's going to break."

"When?"

"I don't know." Shammy moved away from the door. Toward the center of the room. Where the air was warmer. Where the people were. "But when it does, we'll be ready. The triad holds. Blood or no blood."

Ace looked at Shammy. Mai looked at Shammy. The three of them. The only family Shammy had ever known.

"Tomorrow," Mai said. Her analytical voice was back. The framework held. "Tomorrow we continue the investigation. The courier trail. The watcher. The letter. We follow all three."

"And the sister?" Ace's voice was flat.

"We find out if she's real." Mai's fingers tapped. "And if she is—"

"We find out what blood means." Shammy's voice was warm. "Together. That's what the triad does."

Ace's stillness deepened. But her hand moved away from her chest. The letter was still there. But her hand moved.

"Together." The word was flat. But it was an agreement.

Shammy nodded. Her hand found Mai's shoulder. Grounding. Present.

Tomorrow, they would investigate. Tomorrow, they would follow the threads. And tomorrow, the woman who claimed to be Ace's sister would arrive at their location.

Shammy could feel it in the air. Something was coming. A storm. A question. A door that might open.

She stood at the threshold. Watching. Waiting. Wondering if there would be room for her in the answer.

But for tonight, for this moment, the triad held. Blood or no blood. The storm would come. And they would stand in it together.

That was what found family meant. Not that the storm didn't come.

That you didn't stand in it alone.

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