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Chapter 5: Threshold Touch

<!-- Word count: ~5,000 | Target: 5,000 | Anchor: Vera's fingers brushing the doorframe—light, deliberate, a grounding ritual. -> <!-- Emotional Surprise: Vera looks nothing like Ace expected—and everything like the gaps in her memory. -> <!-- POV: Mai | Structural Approach: Interrogation Scene ->

The woman arrived at dawn.

Mai had been awake for hours. The framework wouldn't stop running. Scenarios. Probabilities. Patterns that didn't quite connect. She'd mapped the courier trail to three relay points. She'd traced the atmospheric residue to a district that led nowhere. She'd analyzed the paper composition until the numbers blurred.

And still, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was missing something.

The knock came at 6:47 AM. Precise. Deliberate. Not a courier's knock, too measured. Not a threat's knock, too controlled.

Mai opened the door.

The woman stood at the threshold. Dark hair with violet undertones. Not Ace's black-violet, but close enough to suggest relation. Eyes that could be Ace's shape or anyone's. Height that matched Mai's own. Exactly. 165 centimeters. Deliberate visual parallel.

And then she did something that made Mai's analytical framework stutter.

Her fingers brushed the doorframe. Light. Deliberate. A grounding ritual.

Threshold touch.

“Vera.” The name was a statement. Mai's voice was analytical. Controlled. “The letter said you would come.”

“The letter said I would find her.” Vera's voice was measured. Careful. “It didn't say when.”

“But you found us anyway.”

“I've been looking for years.” Vera's hand stayed near the doorframe. Not touching. Hovering. “I'm good at finding things.”

Mai's framework clicked into place. Pattern-seeking. Analysis. The woman was controlled. Careful with her words. Measured in her delivery.

But the threshold touch. That wasn't controlled. That was unconscious. A habit that betrayed

something underneath the careful presentation.

“Where's Ace?” Vera asked. Not demanding. Asking.

“Asleep.” Mai didn't move from the doorway. “We should talk first.”

Vera's eyes shifted. Just slightly. Taking in the room. The exits. The layout. The way Mai's hand rested near her disruptor pistol.

“I'm not here to hurt her.” Vera's voice was still measured. “I'm here to find her. There's a difference.”

“That's what the letter said.” Mai's fingers tapped the doorframe. One. Two. Three. “But the letter came from a relay point that was watched. Someone wanted us to find you. Or someone wanted you to find us.”

“I know.” Vera's controlled exterior cracked. Just slightly. “I know someone is watching. I've been watched for months. That's why I came now. Before they move.”

“Who's watching?”

“I don't know.” Vera's hand found the doorframe again. Threshold touch. “But they're not the ones who sent the letter. The letter was real. The watchers... they're something else.”

Mai's framework ran the probabilities. A real letter. A watched trail. A woman at the door who might be a sister or might be a trap.

“Come in.” Mai stepped aside. “But don't touch anything. And don't go near Ace until we've talked.”

Vera crossed the threshold. Her fingers brushed the doorframe again. Unconscious. Grounding.

The room had changed.

Shammy stood at the edge, near the window. Her presence shifted the atmospheric pressure, heavier, watching. Not threatening. Observing. At 195 centimeters, she occupied the space like a landmark, the kind of presence that made you map a room around her rather than the other way around.

Ace stood by the far wall. Still. Not quiet, still. The kind of still that meant something was about to move. Her shadow-pressure flickered at her edges, emerald glow that Mai had learned to read. The glow that appeared when something reached Ace before her conscious mind could process it.

And Vera stood at the threshold of the conversation. Not the physical threshold. The emotional one. Mai could see it in the way she held herself. The way her fingers found the doorframe again. The way she stood at the edge of things.

“So.” Ace's voice was flat. “You're the one who sent the letter.”

“I'm the one who survived.” Vera's voice was careful. Controlled. “I don't know if that makes me the one you're looking for.”

“Who survived?”

"The Blood-Rift." Vera's fingers touched the doorframe. "Our village. Our family." She paused. "You."

Ace's stillness deepened. Mai could see it. The compression. The fragment. The body responding before the mind. Small, Mai had long since stopped thinking of it as small, but the word still applied in moments like this. Ace barely reached Vera's shoulder. The woman who claimed to be her sister stood half a head taller, and somehow that gap made the resemblance harder to see and easier to feel at once.

"I don't remember you." Ace's voice was flat. "I don't remember a village. I don't remember a family."

"I know." Vera's measured delivery stayed measured. "You survived. I survived. But you don't remember, and I... I remember enough."

"Enough?"

"I remember the fire." Vera's voice cracked. Just slightly. "I remember the screaming. I remember someone reaching for me. A hand in the dark. I remember being pulled away. And I remember a name." She paused. "Vera. Someone screamed it. In the fire. I think... I think it was my name."

Ace's shadow-pressure flickered. The emerald glow pulsed at her edges. Her body was responding. The fragment was receiving.

"You think." Mai's voice was analytical. "You're not sure."

"I'm not sure of anything." Vera's controlled delivery faltered. "There are gaps. Absences. Things I should remember that I don't. Things I remember that might not be mine."

"What do you remember?"

"I remember dying."

The word landed heavy in the room.

"I remember heat. Fire. Pain. I remember reaching for someone. And then..." She stopped. "And then I don't remember anything until I woke up. Years later. Alone. No village. No family. Just the name. And the need to find you."

Mai's framework ran the probabilities. Trauma gaps were real. Memory loss was real. But the delivery was too controlled. The story had gaps. But were they trauma gaps or constructed gaps?

"You have a letter." Mai's analytical voice clicked into place. "You have a name. You have a story. But you don't have proof."

"No." Vera's fingers found the doorframe. "I don't have proof. I have this."

She reached into her coat. Slowly. Deliberately. Mai's hand moved to her disruptor pistol. But Vera wasn't reaching for a weapon.

She pulled out a wooden bird. Carved. Wings spread. Cracked down the middle.

"This was ours." Vera's voice was careful. "You had one half. I had the other. When we were children." She held out the half. "I don't know if you remember. But your body might. Your fragment."

Ace's hand moved toward the wooden bird. Not deliberately. Her body was responding before her

mind.

The fragment pulsed. The emerald glow intensified. Ace's fingers touched the wood.

And the memory hit her.

Not burning hair this time. Not screaming. Something else. A room. A fire. A child's hand reaching for hers. A wooden bird. Cracked. Two halves.

"You kept this." A child's voice. Not Vera's voice. A child's voice from the memory. "You said we'd always find each other."

Ace's hand pulled back. The fragment pulsed. The memory faded.

The room was silent.

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

"She's not lying." Shammy's voice was warm. Direct. "The pressure around her is wrong. But she believes what she's saying. The gaps aren't lies. They're... absences."

"But?" Mai's analytical voice pressed.

"But the story is too clean." Shammy moved through the room. The atmospheric pressure followed her. "She believes it. But that doesn't mean it's true. It means she believes it. Someone could have made her believe it."

Mai's framework clicked. Constructed memories. Implanted beliefs. The story had gaps. Not because they were hidden, but because they weren't there. Someone could have built a story. Filled in the pieces that were missing. Left out the pieces that would give away the construction.

"What do you remember about the Blood-Rift?" Mai's voice was analytical. "Details. Names. Places. Anything specific."

Vera's controlled delivery faltered. "I remember... fire. Heat. The smell of burning." She paused. "I remember someone screaming. I don't know if it was me. I don't know if it was you."

"What about before? Before the fire?"

"I don't..." Vera's fingers touched the doorframe. "I don't remember before. There are things I should know. The village name. Our parents' faces. What we did the day before. They're not there. I have memories of the fire. I have gaps where everything else should be."

Mai's fingers tapped the table. One. Two. Three. The framework was running.

The details that matched were emotional. The details that didn't match were factual.

Vera remembered the fire. She remembered the screaming. She remembered the name. But she didn't remember the village. The parents. The life before.

That was trauma. That was real.

But it was also consistent with constructed memory. Someone could have implanted the emotional core and left out the factual details. The story was too clean in its gaps. Too consistent in its

absences.

"Where have you been?" Mai's voice pressed. "For years. Where did you go after the Blood-Rift?"

"I don't know." Vera's measured delivery cracked. "I woke up. I was alone. I've been looking ever since."

"How did you find us?"

"I'm good at finding things." Vera's controlled delivery rebuilt. "I followed trails. I paid contacts. I looked for years. And when I found the name. The Foundation had records of you. I came."

"The Foundation had records." Mai's analytical voice clicked. "The Foundation archives were breached three months ago."

Vera's threshold touch intensified. "I know. I was the one who breached them."

Mai's framework stuttered. The probabilities shifted.

"You breached the archives." Mai's voice was careful. "How?"

"I have... abilities." Vera's controlled delivery faltered. "Not like yours. Not like the triad's. But I can find things. I can access systems. I can see patterns that other people can't see."

"What kind of abilities?"

"I don't know what they're called." Vera's fingers touched the doorframe. "I've always had them. Since I woke up. I can feel where things are. I can find paths that shouldn't exist."

Mai's framework ran the probabilities. Abilities. Accessing systems. Finding paths.

That sounded like a vector.

"What vector are you?" Mai's voice was analytical.

"I don't know what that means." Vera's controlled delivery stayed controlled. "I've never been trained. I've never been part of a triad. I just... I can find things. I can see connections."

Mai's fingers tapped. The framework was running.

If Vera was telling the truth, she was a survivor. A vector. Alone. Looking for her sister.

If Vera was lying, she was a construct. Built to find Ace. Built to activate the fragment.

The probabilities were almost even.

"Can I see the letter again?" Mai's voice was analytical. "The original. Not a copy."

Vera reached into her coat. Pulled out the paper. The ink bled blue at the edges. The paper was water-damaged. The handwriting was familiar in a way Mai couldn't place.

Mai studied it. The composition. The writing style. The paper quality.

Northern province. Water damage. Ink bleeding.

And then she saw it.

The handwriting. The shape of the letters. The way the "V" curved.

It matched Ace's handwriting. Not exactly. Close. Like someone had studied it. Like someone had learned it.

"You wrote this." Mai's voice was analytical. Careful.

"I did." Vera's threshold touch intensified. "I wrote it because I wanted you to know. I wanted you to find me. Or I wanted to find you."

"The handwriting matches Ace's."

Vera's controlled delivery faltered. "I know. I've always written like this. Since I woke up. I don't know why."

Mai's framework clicked. The probabilities shifted again.

The handwriting matching. The gaps in memory. The abilities. The story that was too clean.

Either Vera was telling the truth. She was a survivor with fragmentary memory and untrained abilities.

Or Vera was a construct. Someone had built her from pieces of Ace's past. The handwriting. The memories. The fragment activation.

The probabilities were still almost even.

Mai looked at Shammy. The atmospheric pressure shifted. Heavy. Watching.

"She believes it." Shammy's voice was warm. "But belief isn't truth. The pressure around her is wrong. Like she's... adjacent. Not entirely present. Not entirely solid."

"Adjacent?" Mai's analytical voice pressed.

"Like me." Shammy moved closer. The atmospheric pressure followed. "But different. I happened. She was... made. Or something like it."

Vera's controlled delivery cracked. "What do you mean, made?"

Shammy's presence shifted. Heavier. Steadier.

"I don't have blood either. I'm a phenomenon that became a person. You feel like that. But different." Shammy's voice was warm. "Like someone built you. But the building is wrong. Or incomplete."

Vera's fingers touched the doorframe. Again. Grounding.

"I don't know what I am." Vera's voice was quiet. Controlled. "I only know what I remember. And what I feel."

"And what do you feel?" Ace's voice was flat. Still. Present for the first time since Vera arrived.

Vera turned. Her eyes found Ace's. The violet undertones in her hair caught the light. The height difference was striking. Vera at 165 centimeters, Ace barely reaching her shoulder. Two women who

might share blood, separated by a head's worth of height and an ocean of missing memory.

"I feel like I've been looking for you forever." Vera's controlled delivery finally broke. "And I feel like I've found you. And I don't know if you're my sister or if I'm just... a story that someone told myself. But I feel like you're real. And I feel like I'm real. And I feel like we were... connected. Before the fire. Before everything."

Ace's stillness held. The fragment pulsed. The wooden bird was still in her hand.

"I don't remember you." Ace's voice was flat. "But my body does."

"Then let's find out why." Vera's controlled delivery rebuilt. "Together. Whatever that means."

Ace looked at Mai. At Shammy. The triad. The only family she'd ever known.

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

Vera's fingers touched the doorframe. Grounding. Threshold touch.

And Mai's framework kept running. The probabilities were almost even.

But the threshold touch. The handwriting. The gaps.

Someone had built a story. Or someone had survived a fire.

The question was: which one was Vera?

And the answer was: Mai didn't know yet.

But she was going to find out.

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