

Ace & Mai — Black File: Bride of the Veil

Prologue - Manifest (target 2 200 words)

Midnight over the capital. The National Mall fractures first. Reflecting pool water turns to black mercury, then rises into spires that punch through the grass like broken ribs. Streetlights along Constitution Avenue gutter and die in sequence. Satellite overwatch shows the shape resolving: towers, battlements, a single massive gatehouse that used to be the Lincoln Memorial. The castle does not grow. It arrives already ancient.

Gears' voice on the encrypted channel is flat, almost bored. "Anomaly designated Castlevania. Containment priority alpha. Triad and Theta-24 are closest asset. Move."

Ace sits in the lead vehicle, katanas across her knees. Violet fracture lines pulse once under her skin when the castle silhouette eclipses the Washington Monument. She says nothing for three full blocks.

Mai leans forward between the seats, silver hair catching the last working streetlight. "Geometry is wrong. It's folding federal grid into itself. Like the city is being rewritten from the foundation up."

Shammy occupies the rear bench alone, tall frame folded with impossible grace. The air around her carries a low static hum. Temperature drops two degrees. "It wants attention," she says quietly. "We should not give it more than it has already taken."

Behind them, the second vehicle carries Theta-24. Badger's voice crackles over short-range. "Walking War Crimes reporting for gothic bullshit duty. Heavenly, you got the holy water or should I just shoot the Count?"

HeavenlyFather sighs the sigh of a man who has heard this joke seventeen times. "Try not to commit any new felonies before we even park."

The convoy halts at the outer cordon. Concrete barriers have already fused with black stone. Ace steps out first, compact frame moving like compressed intent. She looks at the castle, then at Mai.

Mai meets her eyes. Something flickers—silver-blue sharpening, then softening too quickly. She smiles, small and tired. "Stay close, Ace. Structure holds when we hold each other."

Ace nods once. That is all the promise required.

Act I - Approach Vector (target 8 500 words)

They leave the vehicles behind. Foot insertion through the Metro tunnels that now open directly into the castle's undercroft. Rails twist into iron candelabras. Ceiling tiles drip congealed shadow.

Ace leads. Katanas remain sheathed but the emerald frequency hums below hearing. Mai walks half a step behind and to the right—standard formation. Shammy takes the rear, air pressure shifting with each breath she takes, keeping the group's collective tension from feeding the walls.

Theta-24 moves in loose diamond. Grouse mutters about sightlines that keep changing. Skullker tests doorframes with a combat boot, nodding when they hold. Jello's tablet flickers with corrupted signals—old Foundation containment logs rewritten as medieval Latin.

At the final tunnel mouth the drawbridge waits. Rebar and marble fused into black oak. Moat water reflects nothing.

Mai stops. Her disruptor pistol lowers an inch. "Ace. The threshold equation... it's elegant. Too elegant."

Her voice carries an extra layer. Like someone else is listening through it.

Ace turns. "Mai?"

Mai's eyes catch torchlight that was not there a second ago. Silver-blue fractures into deep crimson at the edges. She takes one step onto the drawbridge, then another. The structure does not creak under her weight. It sighs.

Shammy's hand rises, atmospheric pulse forming. The air between them thickens, resists. Mai walks through it as if it were mist.

Ace moves—fast, irreversible. Her fingers close on Mai's wrist. Skin already cooler than it should be. "Don't."

Mai looks back. For one heartbeat the crimson recedes. "I'm sorry. Structure must adapt or break. You taught me that."

She pulls free with strength that is not entirely hers. The drawbridge rises behind her, seamless, stone grinding like teeth. The gatehouse swallows her silhouette.

Ace stands at the edge. Violet lines flare across her forearms. She does not shout. She simply exhales once, sharp, and draws both katanas. The emerald hum rises to a level that makes Theta-24's teeth ache.

Badger steps up beside her, rifle loose in his hands. "Well. Bride retrieval just became the mission. Heavenly, you still got that moral compass or did the castle eat it?"

HeavenlyFather checks his sidearm. "Still here. Try not to enjoy the violence too much."

Shammy's hair lifts on invisible charge. The air around the group stabilizes—pressure equalized, fear compressed into something usable. "We go in together," she says. "And we come out with all three of us. That is the only acceptable geometry now."

Ace nods once. "Then let's stop talking about it."

Act II - Fracture & Entry (target 11 000 words)

The grand foyer is wrong in every dimension. It wears the shape of the old Foundation briefing room where Ace and Mai first learned to breathe the same air, but the walls are dressed in tapestries of living skin and the overhead lights are replaced by braziers that burn with violet flame. Every footstep echoes with the sound of distant containment alarms.

Ace's katanas carve the first animated armor—Metro car panels welded into plate, federal filing cabinets for greaves. Emerald edges sing. The thing comes apart in geometric sections.

Shammy walks through the debris cloud. Static crackles where fragments touch her field. She rights a tilting chandelier with a gesture; the room's pressure normalizes just enough that no one's pulse spikes into panic.

Theta-24 fans out. Skullker plants breaching charges on a set of double doors that used to be the Oval Office. Jello jams a memetic broadcast leaking from hidden speakers—Dracula's voice reciting

wedding vows in perfect Foundation legalese.

On the far wall a tapestry stirs. Threads rearrange into Mai's face, larger than life, silver hair now streaked with blood-red. She wears the beginning of a bridal gown stitched from redacted documents. "You always said the triad was stronger," the image murmurs, voice layered with Mai's own emotional intelligence. "But strength is just delayed fracture. Come closer, Ace. Let me show you the optimized equation."

Ace's grip tightens until the katana hilts creak. She does not answer. She simply walks forward. Shammy matches pace, one hand resting lightly on Ace's shoulder—pressure bleed-off, nothing more, but enough to keep the violet fractures from igniting fully.

Badger mutters behind them, "If the castle starts playing the wedding march I'm shooting the organist."

They push deeper.

Act III - Descent Layers (target 12 500 words)

Three realms unfold, each keyed to a missing vector.

First realm—Depth. Flooded sub-basements where black water reflects infinite versions of Ace alone. In every reflection she is faster, sharper, more terminal. None of them are smiling. Shammy must release controlled atmospheric pulses to shatter the mirrors before they pull Ace under. Each pulse costs her; hair ionization climbs.

Second realm—Atmosphere. Galleries open to a storm that never quite breaks. Lightning frozen mid-arc. Shammy's presence here is both salvation and hazard; the castle tries to weaponize her own pressure regulation against the group. Ace's compact frame becomes the anchor, moving through gale-force winds that should flatten her, katanas carving paths of emerald calm.

Third realm—Structure. A library tower of petrified policy binders and containment logs. Mai waits at the center dais, fully robed now, crimson eyes steady. She speaks with terrifying clarity. "The binary almost killed us once. The triad was a beautiful lie we told ourselves to keep moving. Let me finish the adaptation, Ace. You won't have to carry anyone ever again."

Ace stops ten meters away. Voice low, dry, observational. "You're still in there. I can hear the part that hates speeches."

Mai's smile is soft and terrible. "Then come get me. Before the bridegroom arrives."

Theta-24 provides the reset—Grouse spots the single silver thread that is still truly Mai, Skullker blows a support column, Jello corrupts the archival memetics. Chaos buys the opening.

Act IV - Bride Threshold (target 10 800 words)

Central spire. Dracula manifests not as velvet and fangs but as the city itself corrupted—Washington Monument for spine, Capitol dome for skull, endless red tape for cape. His voice is every bureaucratic denial ever issued by the Foundation, layered into aristocratic menace.

Mai stands on the threshold. The dress is complete. One hand rests on an altar of fused memorial stone. The other still trembles with residual silver.

Ace charges. Time slows around Dracula's gesture. Shammy counters with full atmospheric release—pressure wave that cracks marble and forces time back into joint. Emerald katanas meet immortal flesh that heals faster than it bleeds.

Theta-24 fights the architecture itself. Badger and HeavenlyFather hold the rear against regenerating gargoyles. Skullker plants charges at structural weak points. Jello broadcasts counter-memetics that make the castle forget its own name for three precious seconds.

Ace reaches Mai. Blade raised—not to kill, but to cut the threads binding the dress to living skin. Mai's crimson eyes meet violet fracture. "Do it," Mai whispers. "Before I forget why I ever wanted to stay."

The cut is clean. Blood that is not blood sprays across black stone. Shammy catches Mai as she collapses, tall frame folding around her with impossible gentleness. Ace takes the other side. For one heartbeat the three of them are simply holding each other while the spire screams.

Act V - Extraction & Echo (target 4 000 words)

The castle collapses inward, stone reverting to asphalt and marble and recognizable DC night. They drag Mai across the drawbridge as it dissolves beneath their boots. Theta-24 covers the retreat with disciplined, ugly efficiency—Skullker carrying Jello after a final memetic backlash drops him.

Outside the cordon, Foundation medics wait. Mai's eyes flicker between crimson and silver-blue. She reaches up, fingers brushing Ace's cheek, then Shammy's wrist. "Still here," she manages. "Structure... adapting."

Ace sheathes her blades. Voice quiet. "Next time the castle wants a bride, tell it to fuck off. We're full."

Shammy exhales. The air around the three of them finally settles into familiar pressure.

Coda - Residual Pressure (target 1 500 words)

Forty-eight hours later. Temporary safe house somewhere in Virginia woods. Rain on the roof sounds almost normal.

Mai sits on the edge of the bed, silver returning slowly. A thin crimson vein still pulses at her throat, fading. Ace stands by the window, compact frame silhouetted, watching the tree line. Shammy leans against the wall, hair calm, electric blue eyes half-lidded.

No one speaks for a long time.

Mai finally breaks the silence. "I saw the equation without us. It was... clean. Too clean."

Ace turns. Dry, observational. "Clean equations don't bleed when you cut them. We do."

Shammy crosses the room. One hand rests on each of their shoulders—pressure equalization, nothing more, everything more. The room's atmosphere steadies.

Outside, distant thunder that might be ordinary weather. Inside, three heartbeats finding rhythm again.

The triad holds.

Round two remains dormant.

For now.

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