

The Foundation helicopter found them in the middle of nowhere.

Ace sat on the hood of a half-stripped Toyota in the junkyard, boots swinging, a small rusted bolt ticking between her fingers. She flicked it up, caught it, flicked it again—metal flashing briefly in the dark like a nervous star. The world around her was all twisted chrome ribs and skeletal frames, a graveyard of machines under a low, cloud-choked sky.

Mai leaned against the same hood, tablet balanced on her knees, the screen washing her silver hair in cold light.

They both felt the vibration before they heard it. A low, approaching chop that turned the clouds above into a trembling bruise.

Ace narrowed her eyes at the sky. “You order delivery?”

Mai didn’t look up. “This isn’t my usual courier.”

The wind hit them first—oily downdraft that smelled of jet fuel and distant rain. The helicopter dropped through the clouds like a guilty thought, all matte-black panels and too many antennas, Foundation glyphs stenciled just small enough to be deniable. Its searchlight swept the junkyard once, found them instantly, and stayed there.

Mai sighed, closed the tablet with a soft click. “So much for a quiet calibration night.”

Ace hopped off the hood. She was barely chest-high to Mai, but the way she walked through the swirling dust made the height difference feel like a camera trick. Her long black hair whipped around her in the rotors’ downdraft, shadow aura twitching like it wanted to be something more.

The helicopter settled into the only gap wide enough among the metal carcasses. Rotors still spinning, side door already sliding open. Two tactical troopers hit the dirt first, weapons low but ready. Behind them, a man in a white coat stepped out, ducking under the blades like they were a personal insult.

Dr. Jack Bright’s badge lanyard snapped against his chest in the wind, Foundation logo half-visible. His lab coat was wrong for the setting—too clean, too bright—but somehow it survived the dust. His eyes, behind smudged glasses, swept the junkyard once and landed on them with the exhausted precision of someone who had been awake far too long.

“Ace. Mai.” He raised his voice over the chopping blades. “Glad you could tear yourselves away from... whatever the hell this is.”

Mai glanced around at the rusted cars. “Exposure therapy.”

Ace tossed the bolt up one more time, caught it, and slid it into her pocket. “Cheaper than your counseling program, that’s for sure.”

Bright’s mouth twitched. Not a smile. Just an acknowledgement that jokes were still structurally possible.

“Get in,” he said. “We don’t have time to argue about whose health plan is worse.”

Ace looked up at the black shape looming over them. The rotor wash pulled a faint emerald shimmer off her, like something under her skin was trying to catch fire.

“Whatever this is,” she muttered to Mai, “it’s big enough they didn’t just send a politely threatening

email.”

Mai’s hand brushed hers, a quick grounding touch in the turbulence. “We’ll handle it. We always do.”

“Cocky,” Ace said.

“Evidence-based,” Mai corrected.

They climbed aboard.

—

The inside of the helicopter was all angles and straps and humming systems, the air thick with the smell of metal and disinfectant. Noise-cancelling headsets cut the rotors down to a dull, distant roar. Ace buckled in across from Mai, Bright taking the seat beside a rack of equipment that looked like a cross between a server stack and a shrine.

As soon as the door slid shut, the cabin lights dimmed to bloodless red.

Bright leaned forward, elbows on his knees, headset mic bent tight to his mouth. “Before we land, you need to understand something.”

Ace tilted her head. “You always say that when the something is terrible.”

“This one’s a new shade of terrible,” Bright said. “Officially, the event we’re flying into has been classified as an SCP-008 variant outbreak.”

Mai’s eyes sharpened. “Prion-based necrotic agent. Classically.”

“Classically,” Bright echoed. “Zombification, necrosis, all the greatest hits. The containment teams needed a label that would make the O5s move fast and not ask too many questions, so they pulled an old mask off the shelf.”

He dug into his coat pocket and pulled out a small slate, flicking it on with his thumb. The screen showed a Foundation header: **EMERGENCY FIELD BRIEF — PROVISIONAL DESIGNATION: SCP-008-DELTA**. Below it, blurred stills: streets, houses, something wrong with the people in them.

Ace caught a glimpse of the word *GREENRIDGE* stamped in the corner.

“But you don’t think it’s 008,” Mai said.

“I know it’s not 008.” Bright’s voice was suddenly stripped of sarcasm. “We’ve done the tests. No prion activity, no classic pathogen signatures. Bloodwork looks boring. Tissue scans are boring.” He tapped the side of his head. “Everything’s boring except what’s happening in here.”

“Neurological?” Mai asked.

“Worse,” Bright said. “Narrative.”

Ace snorted softly. “Try again in a language that isn’t pretentious.”

He swiped to the next image. Grainy drone footage of a suburban street, houses lined up like obedient teeth. In the center of frame, a woman in a pale dress walked slowly down the sidewalk. As the camera tracked her, the time-stamp in the corner ticked up, but nothing else changed.

Her stride, her posture, the angle of her head—all identical with each passing second. Every movement hit the same beats, the same timing, like it was being replayed.

Bright hit play.

The woman walked past a mailbox. Looked left. A dog barked off-screen. She flinched; a fraction of a second later, she flinched again, the same exact way. Time-stamp rolled. Her hair moved with a wind that wasn't there.

Mai frowned. "Looped footage?"

"Continuous feed," Bright said. "One pass. No cuts." He flicked to another video.

This one was bodycam footage, the timestamp jittering with motion. A hazmat-suited operative panned across a living room. Family photos on the walls. TV flickering static. On the couch, a man sat perfectly straight, hands folded on his knees. His eyes followed the operative, but his head didn't move.

"This is SRU-15, Bravo. Visual on subject. No active aggression," the audio crackled.

"Sir? Can you tell me your name?"

The man's lips moved. His voice came out flat, toneless.

"My name is Daniel Hart. I have lived in Greenridge all my life. My wife is in the kitchen. We are safe here."

The operative circled, camera dipping. The man's eyes tracked, unblinking.

"Okay, Daniel. Your ID says you were born in Chicago. You moved here three months ago. Do you remember that?"

A pause.

The man's face twitched. For a moment something like confusion surfaced. Then it smoothed away, as if it were an error being overwritten.

"My name is Daniel Hart. I have lived in Greenridge all my life. My wife is in the kitchen. We are safe here."

Exact same cadence. Exact same micro-pauses.

Bright froze the frame. Zoomed on the man's eyes.

The pupils weren't dilated. They weren't anything. They were just there, like placeholders.

"No necrosis," Bright said quietly. "No pustules. No rot. They just... stick. To whatever line the script gives them."

Mai's fingers flexed on her lap. "You're suggesting the... agent is rewriting autobiographical memory."

"I'm suggesting," Bright said, "that whatever's loose in Greenridge is treating people like characters in a story it doesn't know how to finish."

Ace watched the frozen face on the screen. Something in the stiff angle of the man's shoulders prickled at her. Like he was waiting for a cue that never came.

"Where does 008 come into this?" she asked.

Bright swiped again. Graphs this time—jagged lines, familiar shapes. "On paper? Infection vectors look similar. Initial cluster, secondary spread, exponential growth. People 'exposed' in a certain radius start to... conform. So the initial report used the 008 label. And once that's in a subject line, it's very hard to walk back. Everyone hears 'zombie plague' and starts digging bunkers."

"But you said it's not the original," Ace said. "Say it clean."

Bright met her eyes. For a moment, the weight behind them made the humming metal walls of the helicopter feel thinner.

"It behaves like SCP-008 in all the *logistical* ways we track an outbreak," he said. "But whatever's doing this is **not** the Foundation's 008. Different origin. Different mechanism. Different... appetite."

He tapped the slate off and dropped it back into his pocket. The cockpit light visible through the bulkhead window pulsed as the pilot spoke into his own headset. The helicopter banked slightly, rotors straining against a new crosswind.

Mai adjusted her straps. "Containment status?"

"Perimeter established twenty hours ago. Full cordon. We've got a five-kilometer ring around the town—razor wire, automated turrets, scrubbed drones. Anyone trying to leave gets flagged and tranquilized." Bright's mouth tightened. "Assuming we can tell which version of them is trying to leave."

Ace raised an eyebrow. "Which version?"

"You'll see," he said. "SRU-15 went in as first responder team. We lost coherent comms within thirty minutes. After that we got... noise."

He reached up, flicked a switch on the overhead panel. The helicopter's internal speakers crackled to life, piping in a recording saturated with static and distant alarms.

"...fifteen-actual, this is command, repeat last. Your signal's—"

"—don't step off the sidewalk, he's not supposed to be in this scene—"

"...copy? Identify current position, over."

"—I'm in the wrong house, these kids don't know me, they keep calling me 'Dad'—"

"Fifteen-Bravo, you are not authorized to deviate from—"

"—stop saying that, stop saying that, I already said that line, why am I saying it again—"

The voice dissolved into overlapping panicked repetitions, words folding back on themselves.

Then, a different voice cut through—calmer, but wrong in a way that made Ace's skin crawl.

"We are safe in Greenridge," it said. *"**We** have always been safe in Greenridge."*

The recording clicked off.

No one spoke for a moment.

Ace felt Violet stir at the back of her mind—an almost-sound, a pressure, like a tongue pressing against the inside of reality's teeth.

Something is hungry here, the echo implied, colorless and wordless. *But not for flesh.*

She blinked hard and shoved it down. She wasn't about to give Bright the satisfaction of seeing her shiver.

"So," she said instead. "You've got a town stuck in a bad improv show and a bunch of operators falling off the edge of the script. Why us?"

Bright didn't hesitate. "Because none of my other assets come with a built-in warfire gremlin and a walking tech-grimoire."

Mai gave him a flat look. "Flattery won't improve your survival odds."

"Not trying to flatter," Bright said. "Trying to survive **at all**. Look—whatever we're dealing with, it isn't just messing with individual cognition. It's bending *context.* The town, the roles people play, the way events line up. Classic 008 melts meat. This... rewrites *meaning*."

He pointed at Ace. "You've already got something in you that doesn't care about human narrative logic. Violet's presence lets you stand sideways to causality in ways we don't simulate well." He pointed at Mai. "And you break systems for a living. Rituals, code, sigils, all the little invisible frameworks. If anyone can spot where this 'virus' has embedded itself in the structure, it's you."

Mai's expression stayed calm, but Ace saw the flicker of worry in her eyes. This wasn't just another demon hunt in a forgotten shrine.

"This a formal contract?" Ace asked lightly. "Or are we talking 'do this as a favor and you pretend you erased our files again'?"

Bright's smile had no humor in it. "Call it mutual self-interest. If Greenridge keeps... metastasizing, this doesn't stay a local problem. We've already detected early-stage anomalies in the *reports* about it."

Mai frowned. "The reports?"

"Wording shifts between copies," he said. "Printed memos don't match their archived originals. Minor at first—verbs changing tense, names swapping roles. Then entire paragraphs that were never written showing up as if they'd been there all along."

Ace whistled softly. "Cute. A virus that infects the story about itself."

"Yeah." Bright rubbed his eyes under his glasses. "Some of the higher-ups want to nuke the whole area and salt the earth. Problem is, if this thing is riding narrative structures, we don't know what 'nuked' version of Greenridge we'd end up with on the other side."

He dropped his hands, looked at them both. "So we go in. We learn its rules. We break them. Before it decides that the best ending for this story is the one where everyone on the planet plays along."

The helicopter shuddered as it hit a pocket of turbulence. Through the small oval window, shapes began to resolve out of the dark—floodlights, the harsh geometry of fences, the distant pulse of red emergency beacons.

Ace unbuckled her harness as the pilot's voice came over the intercom. "Final approach. Two minutes. Ground is clear."

Bright stood, a little unsteady, and grabbed onto a ceiling strap. "Last detail before we hit the dirt." His voice took on a clipped, official tone. "For all internal documentation, for everyone we're going to talk to in the next twelve hours, this is an SCP-008 **variant** event. That label keeps people moving fast and predictable."

"And off the record?" Mai asked.

Bright's eyes seemed to darken.

"Off the record," he said, "research cell Theta-Black has tagged it as NB-001."

Mai rolled the letters in her mouth. "Neverborn?"

"Neverborn-adjacent, at least," Bright said. "First in its category. Narrative bio-contagion. No official slot on the SCP list yet, and if I have my way, it will never get a catchy number. Things with numbers get legacies. I don't want this thing to feel at home."

Ace smirked. "You're superstitious, doc."

Bright shrugged. "I'm alive. You do the math."

The helicopter dipped, rotors spitting dust and loose gravel. The landing skids bit into the ground with a jolt. Outside, through the small window, Ace saw scorched dirt, razor wire glinting under tower lights, silhouettes of temporary structures hunched like hunks of metal fungus.

The door slammed open. Night air rushed in, cold and sharp with the scents of diesel, ozone, and the kind of sterile antiseptic that tried too hard to drown out blood.

"Welcome to Greenridge perimeter," Bright said. "Don't touch anything that says 'sterile.' It's lying."

—

The quarantine camp was a wound carved into the landscape.

Ace stepped down onto packed earth that had been driven flat by too many boots. The sky above was a smothered bruise, light pollution from the camp turning the low clouds into a luminous smear. Floodlights on tall poles painted everything harsh white and hard shadow, erasing softness, erasing night.

Beyond the maze of tents and prefab shelters, a second ring of light marked the inner fence. Past that, in the distance, the town itself was only a darker shape against the dark, a smudge of silence where there should have been the soft pulse of living things.

Mai fell into step beside her as Bright led the way toward a command trailer. Around them, personnel moved with the particular brittle efficiency of people trying not to think about how afraid they were. Hazmat suits, tactical uniforms, medics in red-cross-marked vests, technicians carrying coils of fiber and field-assembled antenna dishes.

Every so often, Ace caught a conversation fragment:

"—repeating the same phrase, I know, I know—" "—no, the drone footage doesn't line up with the

time stamps, that's the point—"—"containment is holding as long as nobody *believes* it's breached—"

Mai's gaze flicked from face to face, cataloguing, assessing. "Morale's fraying," she murmured.

"Morale frays fast when the world stops behaving like a spreadsheet," Ace said.

"Or when the spreadsheet bites back," Mai replied.

Bright swiped a card across the reader at the command trailer door. It beeped grudgingly, and he shoved it open.

Inside, the air was cooler, humming with electronics. Screens lined the walls, each one showing a different angle—thermal feeds, drone footage, maps marred with color-coded overlays. At the center of it all, a large table displayed a 3D model of Greenridge in ghostly blue wireframe.

A woman in a black tactical uniform stood over the table, arms folded. Her hair was shaved close on one side, the other falling in a rigid braid down her back. She looked up as they entered.

"Doctor Bright," she said. "Your freelancers?"

"Ace, Mai—this is Captain Renard, perimeter commander." Bright gestured between them. "They're here to make my life longer and yours marginally more complicated."

Renard's eyes measured Ace in a single, flicking glance that took in height, weapons, and the faint, restless shimmer under her skin. Then she looked at Mai, lingering on the disruptor holstered at her side, the rune-etched casing faintly catching the ambient light.

"Good," Renard said. "Complications mean we still have options."

She tapped the holographic table. The wireframe Greenridge rotated, streets and houses erupting from lines of light.

"Town's population: just under fifteen thousand before the cordon," she said. "Non-essential evacuations were incomplete when the first anomalous behavior reports hit. We estimate between eight and ten thousand civilians still inside. SRU-15's last known position was here—" She highlighted a cluster of houses near what looked like a small park. "—and then the radios turned into a bad art film."

Ace studied the hovering map. The town looked so ordinary. A main street, a school, a strip mall, a few cul-de-sacs that curled like question marks. The kind of place designed not to be noticed.

"What about topography?" Mai asked. "Subsurface structures? Old tunnels? Ritual sites? Anything that could act as a seed point?"

Renard shook her head. "We've dug through every record. Greenridge is aggressively mundane. Founded in the seventies, incorporated in the eighties, no major historical sites, no significant indigenous burial grounds. It's the kind of town you build when you want the census data to take a nap."

Bright drummed his fingers on the table's edge. "Sometimes that's the problem. A blank page is very inviting."

Ace felt Violet stir again, a phantom pressure like a hand pressing against glass. The neverborn

fragment inside her didn't speak, but its attention sharpened, focusing on the holographic town with something like curiosity. Or recognition.

She pushed her hands into her coat pockets to hide the subtle tremor in her fingers.

Mai noticed anyway. Her hand brushed Ace's wrist under the edge of the table, a quick electric reassurance.

"Any physical anomalies at the perimeter?" Mai asked, voice steady. "Temperature shifts, electromagnetic fluctuations, reality anchors destabilizing?"

Renard tapped another control. New overlays flickered into view—temperature gradients, EM field readings, scattered notes.

"Temperature's mildly depressed within the inner ring," she said. "Like a constant overcast day. EM shows localized spikes around certain structures—here, here, and here." More highlights. "We've parked mobile Scranton anchors at the fence intervals. They're stable. The town doesn't push against them the way some entities do. It's not trying to get out."

"That we can tell," Bright muttered.

Ace's eyes tracked the highlighted houses. "Those spikes—any pattern? Same house types, same construction year?"

Renard hesitated. "We tried to find one. Every time we think we've got a pattern, the records... shift."

Mai's head snapped up. "Shift how?"

"Minor things at first," Renard said. "Original building permits say one address. Run the search again, it's a different street name. Deeds that were filed in '82 become '79. Same signatures, same handwriting, different dates. We started printing hard copies. Some of those changed, too."

"You watched printed paper change," Ace said.

Renard looked like she very much did not enjoy remembering that. "We watched the *meaning* of the words change. The ink stayed where it was. But when you read it, it said something else."

Bright's voice cut in, quiet but firm. "Which is why we needed you. I've got scientists and soldiers up to my neck. What I don't have is anyone else who's successfully told reality to shut up and sit down."

Ace gave him a sidelong look. "Flattery again."

"Contractual obligation," he said.

She exhaled through her nose, smirk fading. "So what's the immediate ask?"

Renard zoomed in on a particular block. The wireframe view of Greenridge sharpened, a neat row of houses popping into close detail. "Recon and retrieval, primarily. Four objectives:

1. Verify the status of SRU-15—alive, dead, or... rewritten.
2. Identify any physical anchor for this NB-001 phenomenon.
3. Test whether your... unique profiles," she nodded at Ace and Mai, "show resistance or susceptibility.
4. Get out and tell us whether we should level the town, quarantine it indefinitely, or start drafting new physics textbooks."

"Easy shopping list," Ace said. "Anything else? Milk, bread?"

"Don't die," Renard said. "That would be inconvenient."

Mai's mouth curved. "For us or for you?"

"Yes," Renard said.

Bright reached into his coat again and produced two slim, matte-black devices the size of old pagers. He slid one to each of them across the table.

"Local recorders," he explained. "Encrypted, self-contained, no wireless. They'll log your biometrics and everything you say within three meters. NB-001 may be able to touch written records, digital files, even people's memories. These," he tapped the devices, "are blessed by three separate paranoid bastards who hate each other and never met. If anything survives unedited, it'll be those logs."

Ace picked hers up. It hummed faintly in her palm, resonant in a way that made the hairs on her arms stand up. Violet recoiled from it like from a live wire.

Mai's recorder felt different in her hand—heavy with wards. She turned it over, reading the microscopic runes etched along one edge. "Nice work," she said. "Hybrid hermetic and quantum keying. Whose design?"

Bright's smile had real pride in it this time. "Mine. Then I paid two people to insult it in entirely different ways until it stopped leaking."

Ace clipped the device inside her coat. "You're really scared this thing will rewrite your after-action report."

"I'm scared it'll rewrite what we think *happened*," Bright said. "And we'll all be very calmly sure that nuking the site was our first choice."

Silence stretched for a heartbeat.

Renard broke it. "Gear up, then. Inner-gate window is in twenty minutes. We only open it at set times. For now, the town respects that. I'd like to keep it that way."

Ace looked at the wireframe town once more. Streets and houses, a school, a park. All very simple, very normal, like a child's drawing of a place where nothing bad could happen.

Violet pressed against the inside of her perception, colorless and intent.

Stories like this, the echo breathed soundlessly, *never start in the middle.*

Ace turned away from the table. "Let's go meet whatever thinks it's writing us," she said.

Mai's hand brushed hers again, a silent *I'm here*.

Bright watched them head for the equipment racks, the weight of things unsaid hanging between them like another layer of gravity.

As Ace checked the familiar weight of her twin katanas, the lacquered sheaths on her back whispering faint green, and Mai slid a fresh power cell into her disruptor, the camp around them worked, moved,

tried very hard not to look at the darkness beyond the floodlights.

Beyond the inner fence, Greenridge waited.

The town had lived its quiet, forgettable life for decades. Streets named after trees. A diner that had never been on TV. A school whose sports teams had never gone to state.

Now it was something else.

Now it was a story that refused to end, reaching out with invisible, ink-stained fingers for anyone foolish enough to turn the page.

Ace and Mai walked toward the gate.

The first chapter, whether they wanted it or not, had already started.

They hit the gate at 03:00 exactly.

It wasn't superstition. It was scheduling.

"Inner barrier opens on the hour and only on the hour," Captain Renard said as they walked. "Thirty-second window. You miss it, you wait an hour or we cut you out of the fence. Cutting the fence makes the anchors nervous. Don't make the anchors nervous."

The camp muttered and hummed around them, floodlights buzzing like trapped insects. Ace rolled her shoulders under the weight of her katanas, the lacquered sheaths crossing tight between her shoulder blades. The little recorder Bright had given her sat against her ribs, warm and faintly humming.

Mai walked at her side, disruptor holstered, tablet now clipped down in a hardened sleeve on her thigh. Her eyes moved constantly, cataloguing the tangles of cable, the hum of generators, the wreath of antennae around the command tents. Every system said the same thing: we are holding the line, we are holding the line, we are pretending we know what we're doing.

Bright trotted half a step ahead, lab coat flapping around his knees. Renard paced on the other side of them, hands behind her back, expression set.

As they neared the inner fence, the air changed.

It wasn't temperature first. It was sound.

The camp's noise fell away behind them—the shouted orders, the clank of crates, the distant whine of a drone taking off. Ahead, beyond the fence, the world grew thinner. A kind of quiet that wasn't silence, more like a room just before someone hit "record."

Ace slowed a fraction, nostrils flaring. "You feel that?" she murmured to Mai.

Mai nodded once. "Baseline noise floor drop. Not natural."

"Like somebody hit 'mute' on everything that isn't useful to the scene," Ace said.

Bright shot her a sideways look. "You're already talking like it is."

"If it walks like a narrative construct and quacks like one—"

"Don't say quack near my field teams," Bright cut in. "They get weird enough without help."

The inner fence loomed—three layers of heavy-gauge wire stretched between squat, ugly posts, each post carrying a boxy device that made the air around it shimmer faintly. Scranton anchors. Reality staplers. The kind of tech that made Ace itch when she was too close for too long.

Up close, the hum of the anchors was a physical sensation, like distant bass pressing against her bones. Inside her, Violet recoiled from it, twisting away like smoke from a fan.

Renard stopped them a few meters short. "Final rules," she said. "Say them back so I know you'll remember even if the... atmosphere tries to put a hat on your brains."

Ace raised a hand lazily. "Teacher, I didn't bring my notebook."

"Good," Renard said. "Less for it to eat."

She held up a finger.

"One: Do not accept roles."

Mai's eyebrows flicked together. "Clarify?"

"If someone inside tells you 'you're Officer So-and-so' or 'you're my neighbor from down the street,' that is not banter." Renard's voice was flat. "It is the anomaly attempting to pin you into a pattern. You correct them or you walk away. You do not play along to keep them calm."

Ace snorted. "So this is finally the mission where being an asshole is mandatory."

"Use your strengths," Renard said, unimpressed. She held up a second finger. "Two: Avoid mirrors and reflective surfaces as much as you can. Cover them or break them if you must."

Mai glanced past her at the dark lump of the town beyond. "We saw notes in the brief about a mirror incident."

Renard's eyes cooled. "Operative Sato looked into a bathroom mirror and saw himself four years older. Wife, two kids, wedding ring. Whole life laid out in about three seconds of reflection. When he stepped back, he insisted we'd dragged him out of his house, that his shift at the hardware store wasn't over, that we were kidnapping his family's breadwinner."

"And?" Ace asked quietly.

"And it took three anchors and chemical restraints to keep him from walking back through the fence," Renard said. "He's in isolation now. Half the time he remembers who he is. The other half, he's furious we won't let him 'get back to work.'"

Mai's jaw tightened. "So we avoid all that."

"Best you can," Renard said. Third finger. "Three: Short transmissions only. Radios work going in, but the longer you talk, the more... drift we get. Say what you must in ten seconds or less. We will do the same."

Ace tilted her head. "And if we go over ten seconds?"

Renard's mouth thinned. "Last guy who monologued into the mic started repeating the same

sentence three different ways. Command heard three different sentences. All mutually exclusive. He insisted he'd only said it once."

Bright scratched his cheek. "We're still arguing about which version to put in the official log."

"Recorder's for that," Ace said, patting her chest. "Private little black box."

"Exactly," Bright said. "Talk to those as much as you want. They're not listening to the same signal."

Renard checked her watch. "Window in sixty seconds."

They continued the last few meters to the gate.

The opening itself wasn't much—a segment of the inner fence where the razor wire stopped and a heavy, motorized gate sat in its place. On either side, the reality anchors were closer together, their metal housings banded with extra glyphs. A small control box on a concrete pillar counted down in red numbers.

00:36.

Mai eyed the anchors. "How stable?"

"As long as they're powered and undisturbed, they hold," Renard said. "We think the anomaly doesn't like pushing directly against structured opposition. It prefers gaps. Ambiguity."

"Same," Ace muttered.

Bright nudged her elbow. "Try to at least wait until you've had coffee before you compare yourself to contagions, yeah?"

The timer ticked down. 00:19. 00:18.

The town loomed beyond the fence—dark shapes of houses against the dimmer dark of a sky that, on this side of the barrier, couldn't seem to decide what shade it wanted to be. A few streetlights burned anemic amber. No moving headlights. No visible people.

Ace realized she couldn't hear any animals. No dogs, no night insects. Just the anchors' hum and the distant, careful operations of the camp behind them.

00:07.

Renard stepped back, giving them the space between herself and the gate. "You step through, you stay on Cedar Lane until you hit Brookside," she said. "We've marked your path with UV tags. Don't improvise the route unless you have to. Predictability gives us leverage."

"Cedar then Brookside," Mai repeated. "Stay between the marks. Radios minimal."

Ace rolled her neck until it cracked. "Don't look in mirrors. Don't accept improv notes from reality. Keep it under ten seconds on comms. Got it."

Bright gave them a thin smile. "If you start feeling like the whole world's waiting for your next line, that's normal. If it starts feeding you one—"

"We cut the mic," Ace said.

“Exactly.”

00:02.

The timer hit zero.

The gate whined as heavy locks disengaged. The reality anchors on either side pulsed, their hum climbing half a tone. Ace felt the pressure in her skull spike, then loosen. For a moment, it was as if someone had drawn a line in the air with a razor, and the space beyond it was not quite in the same category as the space she currently occupied.

Then the gate rolled inward with a grinding screech.

“Window is open,” Renard said. “Good hunting.”

Ace didn’t salute. That wasn’t their relationship. She just shot the woman a quick, crooked grin, then stepped through the opening.

The air changed like walking through an invisible curtain.

It wasn’t colder, exactly. Just... thinner. The sounds of the camp smothered behind her, the lights behind her back suddenly feeling like stage lamps warming a closed curtain. Ahead, the town opened like a dim, waiting mouth.

Mai’s shoulder brushed hers as she crossed the threshold. For a half-second, Ace’s balance jolted, like the world had misjudged where the ground should be and corrected at the last moment.

Inside her chest, something tugged sideways.

Violet unfurled very slightly, a shadow echo stretching long against the unseen. The fragment seemed intrigued, tasting edges no one else could feel.

Here, it whispered across her nerves. Not hostile. Not calm. Just... attentive. *This place remembers what it hasn’t done yet.*

The gate clanged shut behind them.

The anchors’ hum dropped away, leaving a hush that felt too deliberate to be natural.

Ace exhaled slowly. “On a scale from one to ‘we made a mistake,’ how much do you regret signing up already?” she asked.

Mai listened to the empty street in front of them. “Ask me again when something moves.”

—

Cedar Lane looked like a postcard someone had forgotten to mail.

Two-story houses, all variations of the same design, stood in neat rows along the asphalt. Lawns had frozen in various states of upkeep—several perfectly trimmed, others overgrown, one mid-mow with an electric mower sitting silent and abandoned in the middle like a piece of evidence.

Porch lights glowed on some houses, off on others. A couple of windows held the pale flicker of televisions. A minivan sat in one driveway with its driver’s door open, as if someone had just stepped

out and would be back any second.

No one was there.

The world smelled faintly of cut grass and something subtler underneath. Ink, maybe. Old paper.

Mai flipped a small switch on the side of her visor. The lenses flicked from clear to a faint ghost-green tint as the UV layer came on. Markings flared to life along the curb—a series of spray-painted glyphs that had been invisible a moment before.

“There’s our path,” she said quietly. “Renard’s people stuck to their own rules.”

Ace looked down at the glowing marks, then up at the house nearest them. Colorful chalk drawings adorned the driveway—stick figures, suns, a crooked house with smoke coming out of its chimney. Overlapping lines, the way kids drew when they lost interest halfway through and started something new on top.

All the chalk colors were bright. None of it looked washed-out the way it should have after hours in the night air.

She glanced at the mailboxes along the street. They had names on them in reflective vinyl script, in friendly fonts.

#24 – HART #26 – COLLINS #28 – RIVERA

Names. People. Anchors to lives that might or might not still be true.

“Radio check,” Mai said, voice low. She reached up and tapped the side of her headset. “Greenridge-Entry to Perimeter Command. We’re through. Cedar Lane as planned. No visual contacts.”

Renard’s voice came through a heartbeat later, a little distorted but solid. “Perimeter Command reads you. Timer started. Keep it short, keep it real.”

“Copy,” Mai said. “Logging local observations to recorder.”

She tapped the device at her chest twice. Its hum shifted, acknowledging.

Ace glanced at hers. “You naming yours?” she asked.

Mai didn’t miss a beat. “Yes.”

“...You gonna tell me what?”

“If it survives this, it can choose its own name.”

Ace huffed a quiet laugh. “Fair.”

They started walking.

Their boots made small, dull sounds on the asphalt, the kind that should have echoed off siding and windows. They didn’t. The air swallowed noise rather than reflecting it.

As they passed #24, something flickered behind the curtains.

Ace's hand slid toward her katana hilts automatically. "Left," she murmured.

Mai's eyes had already shifted. "I see it."

A gap in the curtains. A human silhouette standing in the lit rectangle. Shoulders, head, a suggestion of arms. Perfectly still.

The silhouette didn't move as they moved. Its head didn't track them. It was as if someone had cut a cardboard shape and propped it behind the curtain.

Ace slowed, weight shifting to the balls of her feet. "Friendly?" she muttered.

Mai's voice stayed level. "You're asking me to assign alignment to a cardboard cutout."

As if in answer, the silhouette moved.

Not gradually. Not naturally. One frame to the next. It shifted from facing forward to turned three-quarters toward the window in a single jerk, like bad animation skipping frames.

The curtain itself did not sway.

The hair on the back of Ace's neck stood up. Her hand tightened on the hilt of her left sword. Violet's attention sharpened to a point, looking through her eyes.

The silhouette lifted an arm and waved.

The motion was slow, oddly smooth, like a pre-rendered loop playing over the wrong body.

Ace and Mai froze.

The figure waved three times. Exact same speed, same angle, same little hitch at the end where the wrist lagged its own motion. On the third wave, the curtain flicked shut with too much precision.

The light behind it stayed on.

"...Okay," Ace said softly. "That's one."

"One what?" Mai asked.

"One creepy thing I'm not going to forget to tell Bright about," Ace said.

"That's going to be a very long list," Mai replied.

They kept moving.

A sprinkler hissed to life two houses down, sending a fan of water arcing across a lawn. The pattern repeated, falling in an exact same cadence every five seconds. The sprinkler head didn't rotate. The water didn't seem to care about wind.

Mai's visor overlay traced invisible numbers in her peripheral vision. "Water particles are falling at consistent intervals," she murmured. "No variance from air currents. It's like it's replaying one second on a loop with different timestamps."

"Town committee really committed to that manicured look," Ace said.

Her joke sat in the air and did nothing. Normally, the world answered jokes with something—wind in the trees, a dog barking, a car in the distance. Here, the universe seemed to be waiting to see if she'd say it again.

They reached the end of the first block. A cross-street bisected Cedar Lane. The street sign stood at the corner, a standard green rectangle on a gray pole.

MA PLE T

The letters looked wrong for a second. Ace blinked, then realized why. Half the paint was flaked away, leaving ragged gaps.

She stepped closer, squinting. Up close, the letters read cleanly: MAPLE ST.

She stepped back two paces. The flakes returned, the P and the L half-eaten, street name almost unreadable from where she'd first seen it.

"Mai," she said. "You seeing this?"

Mai came to stand beside her, visor shining faintly. "Seeing what?"

"The sign," Ace said. "From back there, it looked like a VHS that got chewed. Chipped paint, letters falling off."

Mai stared at the rectangle of metal. "From three meters away, it's clean. No damage. Up close too."

Ace frowned. "I'm telling you—"

"Describe it for the log," Mai said. "Out loud."

Ace tapped her recorder twice. Felt the hum confirm. "Recorder entry. Initial street sign anomaly. At approximately"—she glanced at the tiny clock display on her wrist—"0308, vantage at five meters, sign text appeared degraded, paint missing from multiple letters. Step closer and—"

She moved as she spoke, retracing her steps. At five meters, the letters were whole again. The sign was just a sign. Not even a smudge.

She stopped walking.

"...And now it's fine," she finished. "Like it heard me talk and decided not to be interesting anymore."

"Or it's perspective-based," Mai said. "Could be a perceptual overlay tied to distance. Isolate variables later."

"Do you think it wants us to have to 'say' things aloud to lock them in?" Ace asked.

Mai considered that. "A narrative pathogen that only respects spoken canon. Would be on theme."

"Perimeter Command to Greenridge-Entry." Renard's voice crackled softly in their ears. "Status?"

Mai thumbed her mic. "Cedar Lane westbound. Minor anomalies. No direct contact. Continuing toward Brookside. Will advise at next checkpoint."

"Copy," Renard said. "Keep it under ten. Perimeter out."

Mai let her hand fall away. "Timer on comm exposure is probably being conservative," she murmured, switching her mic off entirely. "But I'd rather not beta-test that limit personally."

"Agreed," Ace said.

They followed the UV marks onward.

—

The further they walked, the more the town's stillness developed... texture.

Televisions flickered in living rooms, always from the exact same offset angle. Every TV they glimpsed seemed to be playing static or news channels with their sound turned down. On one screen, a smiling anchor moved lips that never quite matched the headline text scrolling below.

A mailbox flag lifted on its own as they passed, then lowered, then lifted again, like someone had recorded the motion and set it to repeat.

Once, they heard laughter—a bright, childlike burst. They both stopped, heads snapping toward the sound.

There were no children.

The laughter repeated a second later. The exact same waveform, Ace was sure of it. Her warpsense heard it like a pattern in static. A cut-and-paste moment.

"Log that one too," Mai said under her breath.

"You sure you don't want to give the recorder a name?" Ace muttered. "Feels rude, feeding it all this and not even buying it a drink."

"If it makes it out, we can hold a ceremony," Mai said. "Right now, I'd rather not pretend anything here is sentimental."

They crossed another intersecting street. The UV glyphs on the curb turned right; they followed.

After a few minutes of walking in that thick uncanny silence, Ace realized something else.

"I haven't seen a single clock," she said.

Mai glanced around. "Streetlights have internal timers. Houses have microwaves, ovens, phones. Plenty of possible time sources."

"Yeah," Ace said. "But I can't see any of them. Windows with their blinds open go dark right at the edges. Like the world doesn't want us checking what time it thinks it is, too."

Mai's mouth flattened. "Keep yours on mission time," she said, tapping the small digital watch strapped to her wrist. "And if that changes without us noticing, then we know it's worse than we thought."

"Oh good," Ace said. "I was worried it wouldn't be."

The UV trail led them toward a slight slope. The houses opened up, giving way to a small triangular park at the meeting of three residential streets. A playground sat in the middle—swings, a slide, a

climbing frame. The mulch under the playset was unnervingly pristine. No footprints, no scattered toys.

A single swing moved, its chains creaking very softly as it swayed.

There was no wind.

Ace stopped at the edge of the park, every instinct screaming at the back of her mind. "Tell me that's an anchor malfunction," she said.

Mai looked through the visor overlay. Blue-green lines traced magnetic fields, temperature gradients.

"It's moving on a loop," she said after a moment. "Exactly thirty degrees forward, back to center, thirty degrees back, repeat. No external force detected."

"Every horror movie ever made starts here," Ace muttered.

Mai's eyes tracked something on her HUD. "SRU-15's last known position is one block past this park," she said. "They cut through on their way toward the east residential cluster."

Ace made a face. "So we go around."

"UV trail cuts across the park," Mai said. Sure enough, under the ultraviolet layer, faint glowing symbols ran from curb to curb, skirting one edge of the mulch.

"Of course it does," Ace said. "Why wouldn't the tactical team choose the path with the possessed playground?"

"We don't know it's possessed," Mai said.

The swing creaked again, perfectly on cue. Somewhere, a dog barked. The sound had no identifiable origin.

Ace looked at her. "I'm allowed to have working hypotheses."

They crossed.

The grass underfoot felt too dry, too uniform. The air temperature dropped half a degree; Ace could feel it on her skin, though her warpsense told her the actual kinetic energy of the air molecules hadn't changed. Something in her perception had been nudged instead.

Her shoulder brushed Mai's as they followed the UV marks in a slight curve around the playground. She didn't realize she'd moved closer until their arms knocked.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"For what?" Mai asked.

"Gravitating toward the only real thing on this stage," Ace said.

Mai's mouth edged up. "That's entirely acceptable."

They cleared the park. The swing continued its rote motion behind them, creak, center, creak.

Ace didn't look back.

—

Brookside Lane was narrower than Cedar, lined with older houses. The architecture shifted to a slightly earlier decade—smaller porches, different siding, different window frames, as if the town had been constructed in time-slices.

At the far end of the lane, someone had hung a banner between two trees. WHITE letters on cheap plastic spelled: **NEIGHBORHOOD BBQ - SUNDAY 3PM** with a cheery clip-art grill.

Ace eyed it as they passed underneath. "What day is it?" she asked.

"Thursday," Mai said.

"Time?" Ace checked her watch. 03:19. "So if that banner tries to invite us anywhere, we're busy."

"Agreed," Mai said.

An empty folding table sat near the curb, aligned perfectly under the banner. It had disposable plates already laid out. No food. No utensils. Just plates. All spaced exactly the same distance apart, like they'd been copied and pasted from one template plate.

SRU-15's last known GPS ping hovered on Mai's visor as an arrow. She followed it, turning slightly left at the end of the lane, onto a short cul-de-sac.

UV marks glowed brighter here, as if the team had walked back and forth multiple times, reinforcing their trail.

"Here," Mai said quietly. "Signal origin within ten meters."

Ace looked up.

Five houses curved around the end of the cul-de-sac. In the middle stood one with a porch light burning, front door closed but not locked—it had that subtle misalignment doors got when they'd been left slightly ajar and then pulled to by someone who didn't quite care.

The mailbox at the curb was black metal, flag down. Vinyl letters on the side spelled out the family name.

Ace's heart did a strange, small flip.

"Mai," she breathed. "Look."

Mai's gaze followed hers. She froze.

The name on the box read: **KURODA / A. & M.**

Ace swallowed.

"You seeing that?" she asked, voice deliberately flat.

Mai nodded once. "Yes."

“Because if you said no, I was going to have to do something dramatic,” Ace said.

Her full name was Ace now. It had been for years. But somewhere deep in Foundation files, her original surname still existed, archived and redacted and punched into forms she wished she’d never signed.

KURODA.

A.& M.

“It wants us in there,” Mai said quietly.

“It thinks we already are,” Ace said.

Violet reacted strongly to the mailbox, pressing forward against her perceptions. For a moment, Ace saw herself not as she was, but as some small, dutiful version in a neat uniform, carrying grocery bags up the short path every evening at six.

Look what it made for you, Violet breathed. *A role. A house. A history.*

Ace clenched her jaw hard enough to make her teeth ache. The hallucination shattered.

Mai’s hand found the small of her back, grounding her. “Stay with me,” she said softly. “Do not let it define you.”

Ace let out a breath through her nose. “Define myself, huh?”

“That’s the one rule that still works,” Mai said.

Ace stepped off the curb and onto the little concrete walkway leading up to the house. Each step felt too loud, too deliberate. The porch light hummed as she passed under it.

The door had a little ceramic plaque hanging at eye level.

WELCOME HOME! — ACE & MAI —

Printed in cheerful, curly letters. Two cartoon figures held hands at the bottom—a tiny, chibi-sized Ace with twin swords, a stylized Mai with a wrench and a circuit board.

Ace stared at it.

Mai stared too.

“...If I had a mouthful of coffee right now,” Ace said, “this would be the part where it went all over the porch.”

Mai’s eyes were very dark. “It’s constructing diegetic props,” she murmured. “From external reference. It knows us well enough to make merch.”

“Hey, doc,” Ace said, tapping her recorder by reflex even though she wasn’t on radio. “Log entry. NB-001’s taste in décor is aggressively cringe.”

“Don’t compliment it,” Mai said.

"I said cringe, not clever."

"Same risk vector."

Ace very gently reached up and tapped the ceramic plaque with one finger.

The sound it made wasn't ceramic. It was more like tapping the cover of a book.

For a split second, the letters blurred on its surface. WELCOME HOME smeared into something that could have been any phrase. Then reality snapped back and it was just a door ornament again.

Ace drew her hand away.

"Okay," she said. "We have a decision. We go in, or we pretend this end of the street doesn't exist."

Mai glanced back the way they'd come, then at the other houses in the cul-de-sac. Their windows watched silently. Curtains hung in the same exact folds from house to house, just in different colors.

"SRU-15's signal is inside this house," she said. "Or was. Renard's team put their UV marks right up to the porch, then... nothing. No marks away."

"Meaning they didn't walk back," Ace said.

"Or they walked back in somebody else's story," Mai said. "Either way, this is the last confirmed data point."

Ace felt the town around them holding its breath. Not literally. Just in the way the stillness pressed against her eardrums, waiting.

The swing back in the park would still be swinging. The cardboard silhouette might be standing in its window, frozen between frames. Somewhere, a TV anchor's mouth would be moving on loop.

Here, at the cul-de-sac, in front of a house that insisted it belonged to them, the story had put down a bookmark.

Violet pulsed once, like a heartbeat of static.

If you step inside, it murmured along her nerves, *you will see the version where you never left.*

Ace turned her head slightly, met Mai's eyes.

"On a scale from one to absolutely cursed," she said, "how bad an idea is it to knock?"

Mai looked from the plaque to the mailbox to the UV marks at their feet.

"On a scale from one to cursed," she said, "this is already an eleven. The question is whether we want to learn the rules from the foyer or from the street."

Ace's mouth tugged at one corner. "That sounded like 'foyer' to me."

Mai's hand settled briefly on the doorknob, then withdrew before she could turn it. "One more thing," she said.

"Yeah?"

Mai's voice turned firmer, precise. "You are Ace," she said. "You are not Officer Kuroda. You are not any past version this place tries to sell you. You answer only to your chosen name and to what we've actually lived."

Ace's throat felt tight for a moment. She nodded, sharp and small. "And you are Mai," she said. "Not anybody's wife, not anybody's suburban side character."

Mai's eyes softened. "Exactly."

They both took a breath at the same time.

The town waited.

Ace reached for the doorknob.

Somewhere, out beyond the cul-de-sac, a voice spoke in a house they couldn't see.

"My name is Daniel Hart," it said. "I have lived in Greenridge all my life. My wife is in the kitchen. We are safe here."

The line rolled through the empty streets, thinner now, like a bad recording played once too often.

Ace wrapped her fingers around the doorknob.

The metal felt exactly room temperature. Exactly the right kind of solid. Exactly what it was supposed to feel like.

"That's the problem with stories," she muttered.

Mai tilted her head. "What?"

"They're very convincing until you remember you've got your own," Ace said.

She twisted the knob.

The door began to open.

And the town, just for a heartbeat, smiled.

The door swung inward without a sound.

That was wrong first.

Old hinges complained. Lived-in doors muttered when you opened them at three in the morning. This one glided open like it had been lubricated with the director's notes.

Ace stepped over the threshold as if she were stepping from one medium into another. The outside air peeled off her skin in a thin film; the air inside settled around her like a costume.

It smelled like someone's idea of home.

Coffee. Laundry detergent. A hint of paper and dust. No trace of the junkyard, of jet fuel, of antiseptic from the camp. The house's air had opinions about what belonged here and what didn't.

Mai followed, closing the door behind them with a soft, automatic push. The latch clicked with quiet

finality. No deadbolt. No chain.

Inside, the hallway opened straight into a living room.

Soft lamps glowed, indirect and warm. A couch faced a television across a low table. Shelves lined one wall, filled with books, little objects, framed photos. Shoes sat on a small mat by the door—two pairs. One set tiny, black, with scuffed toes and worn-down heels. One set practical, red-soled, exactly Mai's size.

Ace looked down at her own boots, dripping faint dust onto the mat. The mat did not react. No little printed slogan, no magical self-cleaning fibers. Just a mat.

She stepped off it.

The house did not scream. It just... accepted this, quietly amending its record.

The door behind them apparently decided it was finished being a door. When Ace glanced back, it was just part of the wall. The handle was still there; the deadbolt looked perfectly normal. But something about the line of it said: you don't need this right now.

She didn't touch it.

"Log entry," Mai said quietly to her recorder. "Interior threshold crossed. Strong olfactory conditioning: generic domestic cues, tailored shoe sizes at entry. Environment appears staged, not lived-in."

Ace's eyes swept the room.

The couch was grey, soft-looking, big enough for two. There was a blanket folded with unnatural tidiness over one armrest—dark green, the exact shade of the warp shimmer that sometimes coiled around her blades. The coffee table had coasters. One had a faint circular stain, precisely one glass's worth.

On the shelves, the books weren't random. She saw titles that existed only in certain corners of the world: dog-eared SCP Foundation print matter that should never have left secure archives, a thin, battered copy of a manga she'd clung to as a child before the rift, an electronics manual in Japanese that looked exactly like one Mai had once mentioned throwing away in disgust.

She walked closer.

The manga spine bore the right logo. The right creases. When she slid it out, it had weight. Smell. Pages that flipped with the right whisper.

Every panel inside was blank.

"Mai," she said.

Mai came to her side, visor flickering softly as it captured. Ace held the book open.

White pages. No ink. No art. The gutters were there, the framing lines, the borders where story should be. All the scaffolding. No content.

"It knows the *shape* of what matters," Mai murmured. "Not the substance."

Ace slid the book back into place. As soon as it settled on the shelf, there was a faint, almost inaudible scratch.

She pulled it out again.

Now the first page had a single, sketched panel. A girl, roughly drawn, hair too long, face half-formed. Standing in front of a village house that looked nothing like anything from the original manga but very much like Ace's memories.

The caption under it read:

AKIRA COMES HOME LATE AGAIN.

Ace's fingers tightened on the paper. "That line," she said, low.

Mai's gaze moved between the panel and Ace's face. "Wrong?"

"Close," Ace said. "But wrong. I didn't come home late. There wasn't enough time to—"

She cut herself off, jaw clenching. The memory bit back, sharp and bright; the smell of smoke, the taste of metal, the sound of screaming cut short. The moment the rift opened and the world turned inside-out.

The page tried to fill the gap with something more palatable.

Mai's hand closed gently over the book, guiding it back to the shelf. "Don't let it backfill your history," she said. "It has templates, not facts."

Ace let the book go.

Violet pressed cool fingers along the inside of her skull, interested, like a musician testing an instrument. *It's guessing,* the echo murmured. *It wants you to accept the guess so it can stop thinking.*

Ace exhaled. "Make it work for it," she muttered.

They moved deeper into the living room.

The photos on the wall were worse.

At first glance, they were pleasant, almost aggressively so. Shots of two women in various locations—city streets, beaches, a cabin somewhere cold. In every frame, Ace and Mai smiled, or at least some version of them did. Ace's hair was tied back in ways she never wore it. Mai's clothes had extra color, softer cuts. They looked happy.

From across the room, it almost worked.

Up close, the seams showed.

Ace stepped to the nearest frame. It showed her and Mai at a seaside pier, gulls frozen overhead, waves mid-crash behind them. Ace wore a black hoodie with a stylized sword logo. Mai had a cone of ice cream in one hand, the other thrown around Ace's shoulders.

Except—

Ace leaned in until the glass almost touched the tip of her nose.

The ice cream didn't quite exist. It was the right shape, the right color, casting a shadow on Mai's wrist. But the texture was wrong. Too smooth, like clay. Mai's fingers around the cone didn't indent it; they hovered on top as if afraid to truly touch.

And Ace's hoodie logo wasn't any brand she recognized. It was a tangle of lines that, if she let her eyes unfocus, almost spelled NB-001.

"Do we own that hoodie?" she asked.

Mai stared at the frame. "We do not," she said. "Also, I hate pistachio."

"Looks like pistachio," Ace said.

"It does," Mai replied. "Which proves how little this thing knows me."

Ace carefully turned the frame face-down on the shelf.

The photo behind it, partially hidden, showed something else. Not them. Not exactly. Just a smear of color, like the world hadn't committed yet.

"Okay," Ace said. "Photo wall is a no from me."

"Agreed," Mai said. "Kitchen next."

They left the living room.

—

The kitchen was exactly where a television show would put it: just off the living space, open-plan, a counter dividing the two. Stainless steel appliances, white cabinets, a small round table by a window that looked out onto darkness.

Every chair was tucked in except one. That one was pulled out slightly, angled as if someone had just stood up.

A mug sat on the table. Steam rose from it in a thin wisp.

Ace's throat went dry.

"Is that...?" she started.

Mai moved past her, scanning, reading the invisible. "Liquid temperature... fifty-six degrees," she murmured. "Too warm to be sitting here for long. No heat trace on the chair itself. No residual body heat on the mug handle."

"It's generating props hotter than the scene around them," Ace said. "Lazy."

She stepped up to the table, peering into the mug.

Black coffee, no cream, no sugar. The steam curled in loops that seemed almost like letters if she stared too long.

The mug itself had text in cheerful font:

WORLD'S MOST CHAOTIC DEMON HUNTRESS

Mai leaned closer to read it. "...Absolutely not," she said.

Ace smirked despite herself. "I mean. I've had worse job titles."

"But you've never let anyone print them on crockery," Mai said firmly.

Ace reached out and touched the mug. It was warm. Heavy. Real.

The handle fit her fingers exactly.

She lifted it a centimeter off the table, then put it back down.

"Okay, test," she said. "Tell me what this says."

Mai's eyes flicked to the mug, then away. "I'm not giving it the satisfaction."

"Humor me."

Mai sighed, but obeyed. "WORLD'S MOST CHAOTIC DEMON HUNTRESS," she recited.

Ace nodded slowly. "All right. So at least on object-level text, we're synchronized. For now."

She turned to the counter.

On it lay a pile of mail. Envelopes, a couple of glossy junk fliers, a folded local paper. The envelopes had typed addresses, all the same neat font.

She picked up the first one.

ACE KURODA & MAI [SURNAME NOT LISTED] 24 BROOKSIDE CT GREENRIDGE, USA

"No, you do not get my last name," Mai said, almost absently, as if talking to a misbehaving AI.

Ace flipped the envelope over. No sender, no stamp. Just a crease where the flap was.

She slid a thumb under the flap and opened it.

Inside was a sheet of paper with a single sentence, center-justified.

YOUR SHIFT STARTS IN FIVE MINUTES. DON'T BE LATE THIS TIME.

Ace stared at it.

The words shifted.

For a heartbeat, they said:

YOUR PATROL STARTS IN FIVE MINUTES. DON'T LET HER OUT OF YOUR SIGHT.

Then:

YOUR SCENE STARTS IN FIVE MINUTES. DON'T DROP YOUR LINE THIS TIME.

Her pulse ticked a fraction faster. She frowned, crumpled the paper in her fist without reading further, and dropped it back on the pile.

"Memo to NB-001," she said. "I don't do shifts."

"You do patrols," Mai said. "But not on anybody else's script."

Ace's recorder hummed against her ribs, catching the words, pinning them down. That, at least, she trusted.

The fridge was magnet heaven.

They moved to it almost reluctantly, knowing exactly what they'd find there and wanting to be wrong.

Photos. Schedules. A childish drawing held up by a magnet shaped like a smiling sun. One half of the fridge door was covered in a neatly printed calendar. Every day had something written in.

On Monday: "Mai - lab; Ace - patrol; groceries."

On Wednesday: "CHECK WARDS" in big letters.

On Friday: "MOVIE NIGHT." Underlined three times. Someone had doodled popcorn in the margin.

The childish drawing showed two stick figures under a huge green swirl in the sky. One figure had a sword. The other had what might have been a gun or a wrench. Above them, in wobbly letters: MOM & MOM SAVE THE WORLD.

Mai stared at it, expression unreadable.

"Okay," Ace said quietly. "Points for consistency."

Mai lifted a corner of the paper, peeking at the magnet underneath. It was a simple red circle with a white smiley face. Generic.

"I hate that it's using this," she said. "Our... connection. As set dressing."

"Could be worse," Ace said. "Could be using your coffee preferences. Oh wait."

Mai's mouth kicked, almost a smile. "We're not taking any of this as canon," she said. "It doesn't get to write our domestic life."

"No," Ace said. "We do."

She plucked the calendar off the fridge in one swift motion.

The instant it left the metal, the dates blurred. The month heading—JUNE? OCTOBER?—collapsed into a long, jagged smudge. The text in the boxes unraveled into looping scribbles, none of which meant anything. By the time the calendar was fully in Ace's hand, it was just a sheet of cheap paper with faint grey lines and no ink.

She held it up for Mai to see.

"Object only coherent while in correct narrative context," Mai said. "Once it's detached, it loses plot."

Ace folded the paper into a small, neat square and tucked it into her coat pocket. "Mine now," she said. "Raw material."

"Souvenir, really?" Mai asked.

"Control sample," Ace replied. "I want to see if it stays blank outside. And if it doesn't, I want to know what it thinks we did on our next vacation."

Mai's eyes softened. "Fair."

Something creaked above them.

They both went still.

The sound came again. Floorboards, upstairs. A weight shifting. Not looped; the cadence was irregular. Someone—or something—moving.

Ace's hand slid to her sword. "That better be a glitch and not an upstairs neighbor," she murmured.

Mai checked her visor. "SRU-15 signal—" Her HUD flickered, recalibrated. "—yes. Source still within this structure. Second floor, front half of the house. Roughly above the couch."

Ace glanced toward the hallway that led to the staircase. "How much do you trust that reading?"

"About as far as I can throw an anchor," Mai said. "But it's a data point."

The creaking resolved into footsteps.

Slow, deliberate, crossing from one side of the upstairs to the other. Then back. Then pausing, in exactly the wrong place—directly over where they stood.

Ace and Mai both looked up at the ceiling at the same time.

"On three," Ace said quietly. "We move. You take point with the visor. I handle anything that tries to give us lines."

Mai nodded once. "One."

"Two," Ace said.

The footsteps stopped.

"Three," they finished together.

They moved.

—

The staircase was narrow, carpeted, the walls hung with more photos that Ace did not look at. The carpet didn't give the way real carpet did; it was like walking on a texture map glued onto concrete.

Halfway up, a framed mirror waited on the landing.

It was big, ornate, the kind of thing that screamed “estate sale find” in a show about pretending to be normal. Its frame was carved with ivy and little birds, all of them painted a slightly sickly gold.

Ace stopped dead.

Mai’s breath hitched almost imperceptibly.

The mirror reflected the staircase, the hallway below, the living room beyond. It reflected Mai, visor glinting. It reflected Ace.

Except—

Ace’s reflection wasn’t what she expected.

In the glass, she wore a police uniform. Not Foundation tac gear, not anything she’d seen in her real life. Blue shirt, badge on her chest that said KURODA, utility belt around her hips.

Her hair was tied back in a neat bun. Her eyes were... quieter. Like someone had gone in and sanded the edges down.

She was smiling.

Not her usual crooked, feral grin. A soft, tired, “it’s been a long shift but the paperwork’s done” smile.

Mai’s reflection beside her wore a lab coat over civilian clothes, a nametag with a blurred surname. Her hair was shorter, cut in a practical bob. She held a coffee in one hand, a tablet in the other.

Both of them, in the mirror, looked like they had somewhere to be at nine in the morning and a barbecue to attend on Sunday.

Ace’s hand tightened on the banister so hard it creaked. The real banister, under her glove, felt rough, cheap wood. In the mirror, it gleamed, polished.

“Ace,” Mai said, very softly. Her real voice. Solid.

Ace’s eyes snapped from the glass to her partner.

In the world that mattered, Mai looked like herself. Silver hair in its usual messy tail, disruptor on her thigh, eyes sharp. Concerned, yes—but hers.

“Don’t look at it,” Mai said. “Look at me.”

Ace dragged her gaze away from the mirror. The pull was physical. Every instinct wanted to check again, verify, see if maybe that life was waiting, if she wanted it.

She stared at Mai instead.

“You’re Ace,” Mai said. Quiet but fierce. “Not Officer Anyone. You hate uniforms.”

“I don’t hate all uniforms,” Ace muttered, forcing humor back into her voice. “Yours looks good on the floor.”

Mai’s mouth twitched. “Focus.”

"I am," Ace said. She swallowed hard. "Breaker?"

Mai nodded.

They moved in sync.

Ace averted her eyes fully, looking at the top of the frame, the wall above. Mai pulled a small, folded cloth from a pocket—a strip of dull black fabric etched with sigils so small they were almost texture. She flicked her wrist, and the cloth shot upward with a little kinetic charge, slapping across the mirror's surface like liquid shadow.

The glass vanished.

In its place, Ace saw only matte black, the cloth clinging as if the surface underneath had gone slightly sticky.

The house did not protest. The landing light didn't flicker. The mirror didn't crack.

"Mirror neutralized," Mai murmured. "No reflective planes between us and the second floor, as far as the visor can tell."

Ace let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Her pulse started to fall back toward a safer range. "Remind me to steal a few rolls of that cloth on the way out," she said.

"Already planned," Mai replied.

They continued up.

—

The upstairs hall was a short spine with rooms on either side. The footprints they heard had left no marks on the carpet, which remained stubbornly unrumpled.

Doors stood slightly ajar, enough that shadows fell differently across the thresholds.

Mai's visor painted subtle overlays on her world. She lifted a hand and pointed. "SRU-15 beacon strongest there," she said. Second door on the left.

Ace nodded. "Clear the others first. No surprises behind us."

The first room on the right was a bathroom.

They both stopped simultaneously. Old training. Always know where the most dangerous room in a building is, and it's almost always the one with the most reflective surfaces.

Mai peered around the doorframe, using the visor's non-optical modes as much as possible.

"Sink," she whispered. "Chrome fixtures. Shower glass. Tile. Two mirrors. One main above sink, one small, adjustable. No heat signatures."

Ace made a face. "We could just toss a grenade in and close the door."

"And risk watching the fragments land in eleven other plausible versions of the room," Mai said. "Pass."

She pulled another strip of black cloth from her pouch, this one longer. With precise, practiced movements, she flicked it in an arc. It hit the main mirror, slid across, and clung. Another throw for the smaller one. Then she stepped in, eyes fixed on the floor, back to the most reflective surfaces as much as possible.

Ace stayed in the hall, listening. Nothing splintered, nothing whispered.

Mai returned a moment later. "Bathroom mirrors covered," she said. "We'll still get reflections off chrome, but those are small surface areas. Lower cognitive payload."

"You say the sweetest things," Ace murmured.

They cleared the room opposite—a small office. Desk. Computer. Bookshelves.

On the desk sat a laptop, its screen dark but humming softly.

Mai glanced at it. "Tempting."

"No," Ace said instantly.

Mai nodded. "Agreed. No foreign OS inside the anomalous zone. I don't want to see what kind of updates this place pushes."

They shut the office door carefully.

First door on the left was a bedroom.

The bed was made. The sheets had that unnatural flatness of hotel linens in brochures. Two pillows. A nightstand on each side.

On Ace's side: a stack of old manga volumes and a lamp shaped like a katana, the blade glowing neon green when switched on. On Mai's side: a charging pad, a disassembled circuit board, a notebook full of scribbled formulae.

Ace didn't step inside. She didn't want to see what the closet thought they wore.

"Later," she said. "If we absolutely have to."

Mai didn't argue.

They moved to the second door.

It was closed.

SRU-15's beacon, such as it was, pulsed faintly on Mai's HUD, directly behind it. "Signal intermittent," she said. "But it's there."

Ace positioned herself to the side of the frame. "You open, I greet?"

Mai nodded.

She tapped her recorder once. "Entry to suspected SRU-15 location," she murmured for the log. "Second floor, front room. Possible subject compromised."

Ace drew her left katana halfway, just enough for the blade to slide free with a whisper, green resonance flickering along the edge. The aura stayed muted; she didn't want to light herself up more than this town already had.

Mai's hand closed on the doorknob.

It turned easily.

She pushed.

—

The room beyond was a child's bedroom.

That registered first.

Small bed against one wall, covered in a blanket printed with stars and spaceships. A bookshelf full of colorful spines. Stuffed toys in a net in the corner. Posters on the walls—cartoon monsters, superheroes, a stylized spaceship that looked suspiciously like one Mai had once designed in a simulation for a bet.

The air smelled like crayons and dust and something faintly sweet.

But none of that mattered compared to the man sitting on the edge of the bed.

He wore half of a Foundation tactical suit. The trousers and boots were regulation. The upper half was all wrong—a flannel shirt in blue and white, sleeves rolled up, collar open. One of his wrists still had a snapped plastic cuff from a hazmat glove dangling off it like a forgotten bracelet.

His hands were clasped loosely between his knees. His head was tipped down, eyes on the floor.

He looked up when they entered.

He had a beard he shouldn't have had time to grow.

"Dad?" he said.

His voice split on the second syllable. It sounded like he was saying two different words at once—*Doc?* overlaying *Dad?* The result was a glitchy, harmonized noise that made Ace's skin prickle.

She kept her sword low, not raised. "Not your dad," she said. "Try again."

His gaze skittered between them. For a heartbeat, he saw them. Ace saw it in the micro-flinch, the way his pupils adjusted, the Foundation training trying to assert itself.

"SRU-15 Bravo," he said, too fast, too drilled. "Operator... operator..." His forehead creased. "...Daniel Hart," he finished, and the way he said it was all wrong. Memorized, not remembered.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Hart," she repeated. "We saw your earlier performance. You've been making friends downstairs."

He blinked. The room flickered.

For a moment, Ace saw him sitting at a kitchen table in this house, wearing a cheap polo shirt, a child's drawing tacked to the fridge behind him. Then the image snapped back, leaving him on the bed again.

"I live here," he said, voice slow. "I have always lived here."

The second sentence came out in a different cadence, like someone had dubbed it over.

Mai stepped further into the room, disruptor still holstered but her hand near it. Her visor scanned, overlays flickering in quick, almost staccato bursts.

"Beacon confirms," she murmured to Ace. "ID tag in his chest rig is SRU-15 Bravo. The clothes are... overlaid."

Ace flicked her sword back into its sheath, slowly, openly. Show of non-threat. "Daniel," she said. "Look at me."

His eyes tracked to her face.

"You came in here with a team," she said. "Hazmat suits. Guns. Radios. You remember that?"

His mouth opened. Closed. His tongue searched for a script.

"I came home," he said.

The room flickered again.

Briefly, very briefly, Ace saw another version of him—full tac-suit, visor down, rifle slung. Standing in this same spot, yelling into a radio, words she could almost but not quite hear.

Then that version blurred into a man in a flannel shirt putting a kid's toy back on a shelf. Then back to the current hybrid.

Mai glanced at Ace. "NB-001 is trying to reconcile incompatible roles," she murmured. "Operator. Father. Resident. It's collapsing them into one unstable state."

"Like bad compositing," Ace said. "Too many layers, not enough mask."

Daniel's fingers twisted in his own hands.

"They said—" He swallowed. "They said don't step off the path. Don't accept the part. Don't... don't let it tell you who you are."

He gave a rough, shaky laugh. "You ever tried telling a town you're not from here when everyone knows you are?"

Ace felt something deep in her chest twist. "Yes," she said. "Not with a town. With a Foundation recruiter in a nice clean office. Same problem."

His gaze snapped to hers. For a flicker, it was clear. "You—" he started.

Then the house corrected him.

"You're the neighbors," he said. "From down the street. You moved in last year. You have the—" His

brow furrowed, visibly trying to pull up the right prop. “—the swords,” he finished, lamely.

“Nice save,” Ace said.

Mai took a careful step closer. “Daniel,” she said. “SRU-15 Bravo. I’m going to ask you two sets of questions. You answer the ones that feel like they come from you, not from the ‘neighbors down the street.’ Understood?”

He stared at her, breathing shallow.

“First set,” Mai continued, voice clinical but gentle. “Foundation. Your last briefing before entering the town. What were your orders?”

Silence, thick and heavy.

Then, halting: “Establish contact with any remaining civilians. Assess infection vectors. Do not engage in extended conversation. Do not answer if the environment asks for your name.”

His voice, in that moment, was clean. No double-tracking. The words came from some drilled-in muscle memory, bypassing the house.

Mai nodded. “Good. Second set. Domestic. When did you move into this house?”

His eyes glazed.

“I was born here,” he said instantly. “I have lived here all my life. My wife—”

Ace cut him off, sharply. “Wrong questions,” she said to Mai. “It grabs them.”

“I know,” Mai said. “I’m mapping the seam.”

She looked back at Daniel. “Third set,” she said. “Personal. No foundation. No domestic.”

He frowned, confused.

“What’s the first song you loved?” she asked. “Not background noise. The first song that made you stop what you were doing.”

His mouth opened.

For a second, nothing came out.

Then: “My brother brought home a CD player,” he said slowly. “We weren’t supposed to touch it. He fell asleep with the headphones on. I... took them. The disc was some old, stupid rock album. Track three. The guitar at the beginning...” He swallowed. “I listened to it six times before I could stop. Thought my head would explode. Thought my mom would kill me.”

Mai’s small, satisfied smile was terrifyingly gentle. “There you are,” she said.

The room wobbled.

The posters on the wall flickered between generic cartoon art and band logos that weren’t quite real. The stuffed animals in the corner blurred for a heartbeat, then snapped back sharper, like the house had upped the resolution.

The town didn't like that question. It didn't know how to structure it.

Ace stepped closer, crouching a little so she was more on his eye level. Her knees complained; she ignored them.

"Listen to me, Hart," she said. "You're in two stories at once. One is yours. One is not. We're going to pull you toward the right one hard enough that you remember you have a choice."

"How?" he whispered.

Ace glanced at Mai. "You overloaded?"

"Not yet," Mai said. Her fingers danced across the recorder on her chest. "We need an anchor phrase for his identity. Something NB-001 can't easily repurpose."

"My name is Daniel Hart' is clearly taken," Ace said. "It's already using that."

Mai nodded. "We pick something he's never said about himself in that exact form. Something true, but unspoken."

Ace looked back at him. "What do you regret most?" she asked. "And don't you dare give me the town's answer."

He flinched. "I—"

The room pressed in. The air thickened. The blanket on the bed rippled as if in a wind there was no physical cause for.

On the bookshelf, three stuffed animals turned their heads a millimeter toward them.

Violet hissed along Ace's nerves, feral now. *It doesn't want that,* the fragment whispered. *Regret complicates the script. Regret means there were other paths.*

"Hey," Ace snapped, leaning in a bit. "Focus. You want out of this dollhouse, you tell me something messy that doesn't fit on a fridge magnet."

His eyes squeezed shut.

"I regret not telling my brother I took the headphones," he whispered. "He got screamed at when the batteries died. I just let it happen. He thought he'd broken them."

Ace huffed a tiny breath of incredulous amusement. "That," she said, "is beautifully petty."

"It's mine," he said. "No one else cares."

"Exactly," Mai said.

She lifted her recorder and hit a sequence on the side. "Log override," she said. "Subject SRU-15 Bravo. Anchor phrase: 'I regret not telling my brother I took the headphones.' Binding: Identity: Daniel Hart, Operator SRU-15 B."

The device hummed hotter.

For a split second, the room seemed to tilt. Ace grabbed the bedframe with one hand—felt cheap,

hollow wood. Violet flared, its presence wrapping around her like a shadow shield, not protecting her from the change but helping her see where the cracks ran.

Reality's texture around Daniel tore a little.

The flannel shirt flickered. Hazmat fabric bled through. The beard stuttered at his jawline, shortening by days.

He gasped like someone had yanked him out of a deep pool by the shoulders.

"What—" His hand flew to his chest, grabbing at the harness there. His fingers clawed at the plastic tag of his ID. "Where—"

"You're in Greenridge," Ace said. "You're SRU-15 Bravo. You walked in. The town tried to make you native. It failed. You're with us now."

His breaths came fast. Too fast.

Mai's hand went up, fingers spread. "Easy," she said. "Panic gives it leverage. It loves extremes. Stay in the middle. Boring is safer."

He barked a shaky laugh that wasn't entirely stable. "You sound like my therapist."

"Get a refund," Ace said. "She didn't cover narrative plagues."

His eyes darted from Ace to Mai to the door. "The others," he said. "My team. They— we split. I was supposed to hold position here, keep an eye on the... on the family." His voice stuttered on the last word, almost sliding back into the domestic script. He pushed through it. "The others went to check a report of 'guests' down the street. I... I think the story liked them."

Mai exchanged a look with Ace. "We need locations," she said.

He shook his head helplessly. "The streets keep... folding. I walk the same block five times, it's different every time. Sometimes I live there. Sometimes I'm arrested. Sometimes I'm *you*."

He looked at Ace when he said that. Really looked.

"I opened the door once," he whispered. "And I was you. Short, swords, bad attitude."

Ace blinked. "Rude."

Mai's shoulders tensed. "Projection through external reference," she said. "It's using anyone who enters as potential avatars to test other roles. This house being tuned to us just makes it worse."

"Can you move?" Ace asked Daniel. "Physically. Stand up."

He nodded, unsteady. She stepped back as he pushed to his feet. For a moment, his shadow on the wall behind him had three heads—one helmeted, one bare, one wearing a police cap. Then it settled into something closer to his current form.

His legs held. Good.

"We're getting you as far as the stairs," Mai said. "If we can march you back to the gate, we will. If not, we stash you on neutral ground and mark the location."

"Neutral ground," he repeated, as if tasting the idea. "Does that exist here?"

"Anywhere that hasn't decided what it's supposed to be yet," Ace said. "The edges. Intersections. Places in between."

He nodded uncertainly.

As they turned toward the door, the house finally spoke.

Not in words booming from the walls. It wasn't that obvious.

It spoke through the radio at his shoulder.

The unit crackled to life, though no one had touched it. A voice came through—Renard's.

"SRU-15 Bravo, this is Perimeter Command. We copy your earlier. Assist Ace and Mai with interior search. New orders override previous—"

Mai's eyes went wide. She hissed, "Don't listen—"

"—you are Officer Kuroda's partner now." The cadence of the voice shifted. Renard's tone slid into something too smooth. "Repeat your role for me, Daniel. Say it back so we know you understand."

His shoulders tensed. The tag at his chest vibrated with the radio's hum.

Ace didn't think.

She stepped forward in one smooth motion and yanked the radio unit entirely off his rig, wires snapping from their clips. The plastic casing buzzed in her hand, voice still spilling out.

"—you live here, you have always lived here—"

She crushed it against the wall.

The radio didn't shatter like plastic. It splintered like thin glass. Sound cut off mid-sentence.

The room exhaled.

Ace's palm stung. She looked down. Tiny black fragments stuck to her glove, dissolving slowly into dust.

"Do not," she said to the room at large, "use my name like that."

Violet burned brighter inside her, approving.

Mai tapped her recorder once more. "Log entry," she said. "NB-001 can hijack transmissions with familiar voices. It uses authority tones to assign roles. Physical destruction of the channel terminates the injection. Recommend all teams inside switch to line-of-sight signals only."

Daniel breathed hard, sweating. "I nearly said it," he whispered. "I nearly repeated it."

"That's why we're here," Ace said. "To be rude faster than you can be polite."

Mai's lips flicked in a ghost of a smile. "We should move," she said. "The longer we stand in one

scene, the more the house can adjust it around us.”

Ace nodded. “Hart, you’re with us. New anchor phrase: you regret not telling your brother about the headphones. You are Daniel Hart, SRU-15 Bravo, and right now you’re walking out of the worst casting call in history.”

He swallowed, nodded. “I regret not telling my brother,” he repeated, voice shaky but his. “I’m Daniel Hart. I’m walking out.”

“Good,” Mai said. “Keep that running in the background. Like a mantra.”

They stepped back into the hallway.

The air felt thicker.

From somewhere downstairs, a television switched channels. The faint murmur of it crawled up the staircase—a laugh track with no jokes.

Ace’s skin prickled.

“We’ve poked it,” she said quietly. “It knows we’re not just extras.”

Mai checked the visor’s bearings. “SRU beacon is now moving with us,” she said. “Good sign.”

“Next,” Ace said, “we find where the rest of your team got written into the script.”

Daniel made a small, strangled sound. “And if they don’t want to leave?” he asked.

Ace thought of the village she’d lost, the Foundation labs she’d survived, the countless people who’d chosen cages over chaos because it hurt less.

“Then,” she said, “we’ll have to decide whether to drag them out or rewrite the story they think they’re in.”

The house listened.

The town outside turned a page.

And somewhere, far beyond this one little cul-de-sac, Greenridge adjusted its ending, just slightly, around the fact that two women and a man with a regret about headphones had refused to take their assigned places.

The hallway felt narrower on the way back.

Ace noticed it three steps in.

“Was this always this tight?” she muttered.

Mai’s shoulder brushed hers again. “Spatial compression,” she said. “Or we’re more aware of the walls now.”

Daniel followed a half-step behind, one hand lightly brushing the plaster as if to confirm it existed. His breaths sounded too loud in the close air.

"How do we know," he said, voice strained, "that when we get downstairs, it's the same downstairs we left?"

"We don't," Ace said. "That's the fun part."

"Your definition of fun concerns me," Daniel replied.

"Good," Ace said.

They passed the bathroom. The door was still open, the mirror still covered in matte-black cloth. The cloth twitched as they went by, like something underneath had shifted and found the view blocked.

"Keep walking," Mai murmured.

They hit the landing.

The covered hallway mirror loomed to their right, a tall, dead rectangle. For a moment, Ace felt pressure from behind it, as if the glass still existed in some other version of the house, pushing against the fabric like a trapped scene fighting for screen time.

Violet's presence leaned away from that spot, wary.

Ace didn't look. She trusted Mai's cloth. Trusted the quiet wards woven into its weave.

"Down," she said. "Eyes forward."

They descended.

—

The living room was... almost the same.

The couch still sat where it had. The TV still faced it. The shelves still held books and blank manga and frames that Ace had turned down.

But the details had shifted.

The blanket on the couch was no longer dark green. It was red now, folded the same way, the edges just as sharp.

The mug on the kitchen table had changed slogans.

WORLD'S BEST FOUNDATION FAMILY

Ace squinted at it. "Nope."

"That's worse," Mai said flatly.

On the fridge, the drawing that had read MOM & MOM SAVE THE WORLD now said: THANKS FOR KEEPING US SAFE, OFFICER KURODA. The stick figures still had swords and gadgets, but their uniforms had acquired little badges.

Daniel flinched as he saw it.

"I didn't know it could... rewrite props that fast," he said.

"It's responding to input," Mai said. "We asserted non-canon. It's trying to correct us. Like a text predictor that's very sure it knows better."

The television, which had been off before, now buzzed softly. The screen showed static with a faint, rolling bar of darker grey. Words flickered at the bottom, trying to coalesce into a news ticker and failing.

Ace's fingers tapped an impatient rhythm against her thigh. "We go now," she said. "Before it tries to pitch us any more spinoffs."

They moved toward the front door.

Daniel hesitated. "Last time I tried to leave, the hall just... kept going," he said. "I walked for twenty minutes. When I opened the door, I was back in the kitchen making pancakes."

"Did you actually make them?" Ace asked.

He blinked. "No. I just... saw myself doing it. But I remember the smell."

"Then it got a foot in your sensory door but not your motor control," Mai said. "We can work with that."

Ace stopped in front of the door.

Up close, it looked normal. Ordinary wood, ordinary handle, the little ceramic plaque still hanging at eye level.

WELCOME HOME! — ACE & MAI —

The exclamation mark seemed bigger than she remembered.

Ace put her hand on the knob.

"Okay," she said. "If it tries to loop us, we break the loop. Count everything. Floors, steps, breaths. Anything that doesn't add up, we stop."

Mai nodded. "And if opening the door leads somewhere that isn't the outside we left—"

"—we slam it in its face and try again," Ace said. "Or I cut a new door through the wall."

Daniel swallowed. "Can you—"

"Yes," Ace and Mai said together.

Daniel didn't ask for details.

Ace twisted the knob.

The door opened onto the street.

Not endlessly repeating hall. Not recursive foyer. Just Cedar Lane again: quiet and dim, the swing in the park a distant, faint creak beyond, a porch light across the street burning weakly.

Ace exhaled. "One point to us."

She led them out.

The air outside felt thicker now that she'd been inside the house's curated atmosphere. Smelled more like dirt and plastic and the distant tang of ozone from the perimeter anchors.

The door shut behind them with a soft click. When Ace glanced back, the porch light flickered, then steadied.

The ceramic plaque was gone.

In its place, a small metal number plate read: 24.

Just 24. No names.

Daniel stared at it. "It's... letting go?"

"Or hiding its more obvious tells," Mai said. "We embarrassed it. Narratives hate being caught cheating."

Ace tapped her recorder. "Log entry. NB-001 will alter props to push new roles but may strip them back when challenged, reverting to lower-key scaffolding. Recommend repeated boundary tests to map its comfort zone."

"Perimeter Command to Greenridge-Entry." Renard's voice filtered in, slightly fuzzier than before but still hers. "You've been dark six minutes. Status."

Mai raised a hand, thumbed her mic. "Greenridge-Entry. We're clear of first structure. Established contact with SRU-15 Bravo. Subject partially recovered from narrative overlay, currently mobile and with us. Anomalous interior confirmed."

"Copy," Renard said. "Any casualties?"

"Not yet," Ace said before she could stop herself.

There was a brief pause on the line that felt like someone on the other end was counting to three.

"Snark means you're still yourselves," Renard said finally. "We'll take that. Keep it short, keep it clean. The last transmission from another team gave us three contradictory after-action reports in one packet."

Mai's gaze sharpened. "Clarify?"

"We received a single compressed file," Renard said. "Decompressed it three times. Each time, different text. Same header, same metadata. Different content. We're treating all of it as suspect. Don't give this thing more source material than you have to."

"Understood," Mai said. "Switching to minimum necessary comms. We'll ping at next significant event."

"Perimeter out," Renard said.

The line went quiet.

Daniel licked his lips. "I heard her voice just now," he said. "It... felt more real than the last time."

"Because the house hadn't prepped a script for you inside that room," Mai said. "It was improvising."

"And it's bad at improv," Ace added. "It keeps trying to rerun scenes it liked."

They started down the sidewalk again, following the UV glyphs. As they walked, Ace counted under her breath.

"Twenty steps to the corner," she murmured. "We turned right coming in. Same again?"

Mai glanced at her HUD. "UV trail wraps around," she said. "We can try the same route back and see if it respects symmetry."

They turned.

The swing in the park still moved. The same angle, the same creak. The playground looked unchanged.

But past it, across the street, something had shifted.

There were people now.

—

Three houses down from the park, a porch light burned brighter than the others. On the small front lawn, a plastic folding table had appeared where there had been only grass before.

Red plastic cups lined the table. An aluminum tray held a pile of indistinct shapes that might have been burgers, or might have been something more generic. A grill smoked nearby, unattended.

On the porch, four figures sat in lawn chairs.

From a distance, they looked like any set of middle-class neighbors having a too-late barbeque. One man in a football team jersey. One woman in a sundress. Another guy in a polo. An older woman with a cardigan and a glass of something that might have been wine.

They all faced the street.

They were all perfectly still.

As Ace, Mai, and Daniel approached, the woman in the sundress lifted a hand and waved.

The motion was smooth, more natural than the cardboard silhouette earlier. Her elbow bent, wrist tipping. The plastic cup in her other hand tilted at an angle that should have spilled.

No liquid came out.

"Ace," Mai murmured. "What do you see?"

"Four mannequins that got their rigging upgraded," Ace said.

"Visor confirms low thermal," Mai said. "They're not entirely cold. But not at human baseline either. Like... background extras."

The man in the jersey spoke.

His mouth opened and closed. His jaw moved. His voice came out clear, at a volume that carried easily across the lawn.

"Hey there, neighbors!" he called. "You're out late."

Ace's hand drifted toward her hilts. "We are," she said. She did not wave back.

The older woman lifted her glass in a toast motion. "Night shift?" she asked. "Or just can't sleep?"

Her tone was friendly. Curious. Nothing sinister in it, on the surface.

Daniel's shoulders tensed. "They did this to us too," he whispered. "We walked by when we came in. They said the same lines. To us. To other versions of us."

"Same exact words?" Mai asked.

He nodded. "I can still hear it. Like a jingle."

The man in the polo leaned forward slightly. "We were just saying," he said, "this whole situation's a little crazy, huh?"

Sundress Woman nodded, laughing mildly. "First the sirens, then the announcements, then all the fuss about staying inside..." She rolled her eyes. "I mean, what are they so afraid of, right?"

Her laugh cut off after exactly one second, as if someone had lifted a needle off a record.

Ace felt her teeth grind.

"Answer nothing," Mai murmured. "If they're running scene templates, any input could branch it."

The older woman cocked her head. "You girls want a burger?" she asked. "Fresh off the grill."

She gestured toward the aluminum tray.

Up close now, Ace could see the patties.

They were almost right. Round, brown, textured. But the texture repeated too perfectly across each one, like someone had dragged and dropped the same high-res photo onto each spot.

"No, thanks," Ace said. "We already ate."

Sundress Woman laughed again. Same length. Same pitch.

"Oh, you," she said. "Always on the move. That's our girls."

Daniel flinched. "They didn't say that before," he whispered. "They didn't know us."

"Now we've been promoted to recurring characters," Ace said.

The man in the jersey stood up.

The others didn't move.

He put his cup on the railing, carefully, then took a step down onto the lawn.

Up close, Ace saw the seams.

His eyes were a little too glossy. His teeth, when he smiled, were a little too uniform, like they'd been copy-pasted from a stock photo of "man laughing." There were faint lines on his skin where expressions should have been worn in. They were all in the wrong places.

He walked toward the sidewalk, hands spread in a harmless gesture.

"Long night for the force, huh?" he said. "We just wanted to say thank you. We feel safer knowing you're out here."

He was looking directly at Ace.

The world seemed to wait.

Mai's hand brushed Ace's back, just at the base of her neck. A small anchor.

Ace inhaled slowly.

"Log entry," she said, loud enough that her recorder definitely heard it and maybe the town did too. "Encountering pre-scripted neighbor archetypes. Attempting to assign us roles. Declining casting."

To the man, she said, "Appreciate the thought. But we're not on duty here. Just passing through."

For a heartbeat, his smile held.

Then it twitched.

A hairline crack opened down one molar, too perfect to be accidental. His cheek creased in a new line, at an angle that defied the rest of his expression map.

"Not on duty," he repeated, voice slightly fuzzed. "Just passing through."

He blinked. The movement desynced with the words.

"If you're off-duty," the woman in the cardigan said, her voice skipping once in the middle of the sentence and continuing as if nothing had happened, "you should relax. No one's watching."

"Incorrect," Mai said softly.

She lifted her hand and wiggled her fingers.

The visor overlay flared.

From her fingertips sprang a faint lattice of light, almost invisible unless you knew what to look for. It extended a meter into the street, then dropped, like a net that had never decided to exist.

The world reacted.

The porch scene glitched.

The four neighbors froze. Not in a natural, startle way. They simply stopped. All at once. Their eyes remained open. Their chests did not rise.

The grill smoke paused in mid-air. The tendrils of grey held their shapes like sculpture.

Ace felt Violet lean forward, fascinated.

"Mai?" she murmured.

"I just flicked a simple diagnostic pattern through the local narrative substrate," Mai said, voice clinical. "Think of it as... shaking the backdrop."

The edges of the porch and lawn shimmered faintly.

For a half-second, the chairs, the people, the table, the burgers, the banner above—all of it—flattened. Not physically, but conceptually. Ace saw them as cardboard flats, stage dressing wheeled in to frame a scene.

Then they popped back, the illusion reasserting itself.

All four neighbors turned their heads toward Mai.

Their motions synchronized.

"Don't do that," the man in the polo said.

His voice was wrong now. Too many harmonics. Too many people speaking through one throat.

Mai's hand dropped back to her side. "Why?" she asked.

"Because you're not supposed to," the older woman said. Her eyes were too wide, white showing all the way around. "That's not your role."

Ace stepped between Mai and the porch, just enough to break that line of sight. "We don't do roles," she said. "We do contracts. And we haven't signed anything."

The swing in the park creaked.

The air around them tightened.

On the porch, Sundress Woman's smile cracked at the corners. Little fissures raced up her cheeks, across her forehead, spiderwebbing under the surface of her skin.

"You should go home," she said. "You're tired. You've had a long day at work. Your bed is warm. Your wife is waiting."

Her gaze flicked between Ace and Mai, trying to decide which labels to affix where.

"I have multiple objections to that sentence," Mai said calmly.

Daniel made a strangled sound that might have been laughter if it had felt less hysterical.

Ace's hand settled on her hilt. "Last warning," she said, to the scene, not the people. "Stop talking about us like we're NPCs."

The four neighbors all spoke at once.

"THIS IS GREENRIDGE," they said in chorus, and now there was no pretense. The town's voice came through their mouths like a poorly tuned choir. "YOU LIVE HERE. YOU WORK HERE. YOU EXIST TO

MAKE THE STORY WORK.”

Violet flared, furious.

We do not belong to you, the fragment hissed, not in words but in the way Ace’s blood roared in her ears.

Ace drew a blade.

She didn’t move toward the porch. She didn’t have to.

She simply drew the katana halfway, letting the green warfire lick along the exposed steel in a quick, violent shimmer, then snapped it back into the sheath with a hard *click*.

The gesture was simple. But it wasn’t part of any role the town had written for her.

The effect was immediate.

The scene on the porch stuttered.

The banner above them—NEIGHBORHOOD BBQ – SUNDAY 3PM—flickered between that text and three blank lines and a row of error symbols. The red cups on the table rolled in place for a second, their shadows slipping out of sync.

“YOU—” the neighbors started. Their mouths moved, but no sound came out for a long, stretched instant.

Then, with an almost petulant flicker, the entire tableau cut to black.

Not literally. The world didn’t vanish.

But the people did.

One blink, and the lawn chairs were empty. The cups sat where they’d been. The grill smoked. The aluminum tray of not-quite-burgers waited, perfectly arranged.

No neighbors.

Daniel sagged. “Did we...?”

“Shh,” Mai said. “Wait.”

The front door of the house swung open.

A dog trotted out.

It was a golden retriever, textbook edition. Shiny coat, bright eyes, tongue lolling. It padded down the steps, over to Ace, and sat at her feet, tail thumping against the grass.

A collar hung around its neck. The tag read:

GREENRIDGE LOVES YOU

Ace stared at it.

The dog stared back, panting happily.

"Okay," Ace said. "Now it's trying too hard."

"Mimicry response," Mai said. "It tried authority. It tried neighborly guilt. That didn't stick. So now it's testing... affection. Positive reinforcement. Good dog, bad town."

Daniel made a choked noise. "Please tell me we're not going to have to kill the dog."

The dog's tail thumped harder, as if it understood the word and refused to participate in that outcome.

Ace crouched slowly, keeping her movements deliberate. Her warpsense strained. The dog radiated... something.

Not wrong. Not right. It felt like... placeholder code. An avatar.

She held out a hand, palm up.

The dog sniffed it.

Its nose was cold. Wet. Its fur smelled like dog and grass and a faint, wrong undercurrent of ozone.

"Hey," she murmured. "You real?"

Its tongue lolled, brushing her glove in a sloppy lick.

She felt nothing in her palm.

No moisture. No warmth. The sensation stopped at the surface of the glove, as if whatever feedback system the town was using couldn't quite penetrate physical insulation.

She straightened. "It's a puppet," she said. "Cute one. No haptic fidelity."

Mai's visor flashed data across her irises. "No internal organs," she said. "Thermal shows an even, generic heat signature. Like it's all one material. It doesn't breathe, it just... pretends."

The dog's expression didn't change.

It stood up, trotted a small circle around them, then sat again, facing the direction of the house they'd just left.

"Escort," Daniel whispered.

"Leash," Ace corrected. "If we follow where it wants, we're doing blocking for it."

As if on cue, the dog barked once. The sound was bright, cheerful, and had exactly the same waveform as the bark they'd heard earlier in the drone footage.

"Same sample," Mai said. "Looped."

The dog stood, trotted a few meters down the street, then stopped. Looked back. Barked again.

Waiting.

Ace glanced at Mai.

Mai's jaw was set. "We do not follow," she said. "Not yet. We still have our own route."

She pointed at the UV trail, which continued in the opposite direction the dog was urging.

"How sure are we that trail is still what Renard's team laid?" Daniel asked. "And not what the town wants us to think they laid?"

Mai considered. "Not sure enough to stake our lives on it alone," she said. "But the anchors outside will still be aligned with the original path. NB-001 can edit meaning, not anchoring hardware. I'd rather trust invisible physics than visible pets."

The dog barked again, a little more insistently.

Ace turned her back on it.

"Nice try," she said over her shoulder. "But if you want me to heel, you need bigger treats."

They walked away.

The dog did not follow.

When Ace glanced back at the corner, it was gone.

Only the empty lawn chairs remained, facing the street. Watching nothing.

—

They moved in silence for a few minutes.

The town softened around the edges.

Not literally. The houses still stood, the streets still ran in straight lines. But the intense pressure of the last few scenes eased, like the anomaly was shifting its focus elsewhere, recalibrating.

Ace took the opportunity to breathe.

"How's your head?" Mai asked quietly.

"Which one?" Ace replied.

Mai gave her a look. "The one you think with."

Ace rolled a shoulder. "Violet's restless," she said. "It doesn't like the feeling of someone else telling reality what to do. Territorial dispute."

"Can you manage it?" Mai's tone had the calm of someone who knew the answer but needed to hear it anyway.

"Yes," Ace said. "It wants to help, mostly. This is the kind of thing it was born to break. But that makes it... enthusiastic."

"Like a dog that very much wants to chase cars," Mai said.

"Hey, at least this one has organs," Ace said.

Daniel let out a breath that sounded too much like a laugh. "I can't believe you two are joking," he said. "This place is—"

"A bully," Ace said. "Bullies are less scary if you laugh at them while you load your gun."

Mai nodded. "Also: if we only let it have fear and dread, it has a very simple palette to work with. Humor complicates its model. Unpredictability buys us space."

Daniel shook his head, but some of the frozen panic in his eyes was thawing. "I'm going to quote that in my next psych eval," he muttered.

"Do," Ace said. "If this gets you hazard pay, I want a cut."

They reached an intersection.

The UV marks on the curb forked—one path continuing straight, another turning right.

Mai stopped, frowning. "That's new," she said.

Ace peered down both streets.

Straight ahead, the houses looked much like the ones they'd passed—suburban, sleepy, their weirdness now familiar. To the right, the streetlights tinted the air slightly differently. Colder. Some of the houses had their windows boarded up.

"Split point," Daniel said quietly. "We hit one of these. We chose wrong."

"Wrong how?" Ace asked.

"We went straight," he said. "That's when... it started to skip. We lost track of one of my men between one block and the next. He was there, then he wasn't. But... later, I think I saw him on someone's couch, wearing a sweater. Watching TV."

"Right turn, then," Ace said.

Mai hesitated. "We don't know that right is right just because left was wrong once," she said. "NB-001 could simply be offering two flavors of trap."

"Of course it is," Ace said. "But if we follow the same path as the most compromised iteration, we're walking into the scenes it already prepared. I'd rather go somewhere it hasn't storyboarded properly yet."

Mai exhaled slowly. "Edges," she said. "We aim for the edges."

She tapped her recorder. "Log entry. At first major fork, choosing path we have partial negative data for, to exploit anomaly's weak predictive capacity. Straight route associated with previous team's greater narrative assimilation. Turning right."

She glanced at Daniel. "You okay with this?"

"No," he said honestly. "But staying still feels worse."

"Good answer," Ace said.

They turned right.

The air cooled another notch.

The boarded windows had messages spray-painted on the boards. From a distance, they looked like desperate, scrawled warnings.

DON'T COME IN THEY'RE NOT REAL STAY OUT

Up close, Ace realized the handwriting was identical on every house. The spacing, the slant, even the drips of paint.

"Font-based graffiti," she said. "Great."

Mai's visor highlighted faint, older layers of text beneath the top ones. "Underneath, I see other messages," she said. "Different handwriting. 'HELP.' 'MY FAMILY ISN'T MY FAMILY.' 'CAN ANYONE ELSE HEAR THE LAUGH TRACK.'"

Ace swallowed. "That last one's relatable."

A house halfway down the block had no boards. Its curtains were wide open. Inside, lights blazed.

Three people sat at a kitchen table.

Ace stopped at the curb without meaning to.

They were dressed like Foundation operatives. Full tac gear, visors up. Helmets set neatly on the table beside plates. Ace recognized the cut of the armor, the patch positions.

All three held forks.

All three were in the process of lifting a bite of something from their plates to their mouths.

None of them moved.

Not even their eyes.

The forks hung midway between plate and lips, unmoving.

The food on the plates had no texture. Just flat, uniform beige.

Daniel made a faint sound. "That's them," he whispered. "Charlie, Echo, and—"

He broke off.

One of the operatives' heads turned.

Just a fraction. Just enough to orient one eye toward the window.

That eye was blank.

Not blind. Not hollow.

It just... wasn't being used.

Like a prop eye painted on.

Ace's hand went to her recorder, almost on autopilot. "Log entry," she said quietly. "Three SRU operators seated in domestic role. Locked mid-action. Narrative freeze. No observable agency."

Mai's voice was very, very calm. "Are you sure they didn't move before we looked?" she asked.

"I've been staring for ten seconds," Ace said. "They haven't blinked once."

Daniel's breath hitched. "They were with me," he said. "We breached one of the houses. There was shouting, kids crying, someone burning dinner. We tried to clear the scene and... it all blurred. Next thing I knew, I was upstairs in that kid's room. I don't remember how we got separated."

Mai flicked something on her visor. "Biometric ping," she murmured. "Their tags still broadcast, but the signal is... fuzzy. Like it's being bounced through three layers of translation."

"We're not leaving them," Daniel said hoarsely.

"We're not walking into a domestic diorama without a plan either," Ace said.

She studied the window.

The room beyond had edges, perspectives, shadows. But something about the way the light fell on the three seated figures was... flat. As if they were painted onto a backdrop behind real glass.

"We need to figure out if there's any continuity between their state and yours," Mai said. "If we can thread Daniel back toward himself, maybe we can tug on them too."

"Assuming they still have enough of themselves left," Ace said.

"And if they don't?" Daniel demanded.

"Then we make sure this thing can't use them as puppets against anyone else," Ace said quietly. "And we log everything so we can argue with ethics committees later."

Silence pressed around them.

The town watched.

Finally, Mai said, "We need a control interaction. Something small, noncommittal."

Ace raised an eyebrow. "Like what, knock and run?"

Mai walked up to the mailbox instead.

It was a standard metal box on a post. The name on it read: HART.

Of course it did.

"Of course it does," Ace murmured.

Mai lifted the lid.

Inside was a single envelope. No stamp. No sender.

She pulled it out, unfolded it.

Her eyes flicked across the text. Her jaw hardened.

"What?" Ace asked.

Mai handed her the paper.

The message was simple.

WE CAN FIX YOU TOO.
YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE AFRAID ANYMORE.
JUST COME INSIDE AND SIT DOWN.

The last line wavered, briefly, between SIT DOWN and SAY YOUR LINE.

Ace folded the paper in half. Then in half again. Then again, until it was a tight, dense little square.

She didn't put it back.

She popped the tiny square into her mouth.

Daniel stared. "What are you—"

She chewed.

It tasted like nothing. Not paper, not ink, not even dust. It tasted like absence.

She swallowed.

Her stomach flipped once.

Violet reacted violently, flaring up in a surge of static and distortion. For a second, Ace saw the street around her as a grid of wireframes, the houses reduced to outlines, the operatives at the table to low-poly mannequins.

Then her vision snapped back.

She exhaled slowly. "Okay," she said. "New data point. It really doesn't like ingestion-based editing."

Mai's eyes were huge. "What did you just do?"

"Made sure that particular script can't go back into circulation," Ace said. "Or at least that it has to go through me first."

"How do you feel?" Mai demanded. "Dizzy? Detached? Any sense of—"

"Of being written into a shoe commercial?" Ace said. "No. Just... like I licked an empty page."

Violet simmered, uneasy but not corrupted.

Don't make a habit of that, the fragment muttered.

"Noted," Ace thought back.

Daniel stared between them. "Can you two—talk to each other without—"

"Yes," Mai and Ace said together.

Daniel held up his hands. "I'm just going to accept that as baseline weird and move on."

Mai's gaze went back to the seated operatives. "We can't pull them out alone," she said reluctantly. "Not without risking three more fully assimilated agents. We need a bridge. Something between Daniel's partial reclaim and their full lock."

"An in-between case," Ace said. "Someone further gone than Hart, but not as flat as these three."

Daniel swallowed. "I know one place we might find that," he said.

Ace looked at him. "You sure this is you talking and not the town?"

He grimaced. "No. But the memory fits with the anchor phrase. It's about my brother."

Mai's visor flickered as she tagged that. "Explain," she said.

"We got a call," Daniel said haltingly. "Before we lost comms. Someone on an open channel. Kept saying the same thing over and over. I thought it was just another loop. But... the voice was wrong. It sounded like it was trying not to repeat itself. Like it was fighting."

"What was it saying?" Ace asked.

He hesitated.

"That he didn't remember if he'd ever had a brother," Daniel said. "But he regretted not telling him something."

Ace and Mai exchanged a look.

"That's... uncomfortably specific," Ace said.

"Please don't say this place is cloning my regrets," Daniel groaned.

"It might be echoing them," Mai said. "Using them as handholds."

"Location?" Ace asked.

Daniel pointed down the street, past the frozen operatives' house. "Old community center," he said. "End of this road, near a little square. We heard the transmission on approach. Then the signal cut. Renard told us to prioritize residentials first. So we did. And..."

He didn't finish.

Mai exhaled. "Community center is neutral-ish space," she said. "Shared, multipurpose. Less tightly defined roles than in houses."

"More wiggle room," Ace said. "I like wiggle room."

She looked one last time at the three operatives frozen at the table.

"I want you back," she said, quietly enough that only the recorder and maybe the town heard. "But not as paper dolls."

Then she turned away.

"Let's go meet your maybe-brother," she said to Daniel. "Or whatever the town thinks he is."

He nodded, pale but determined. "If it is him," he said, "and if this thing's using him... I want to be there when we tell it no."

"Good," Ace said. "Because saying no to things that think they own you is pretty much what we do."

They walked.

Behind them, in the house with the open curtains, three forks hovered in three unmoving hands.

The food on the plates did not cool.

The story holding them there refused, for the moment, to move forward.

It was waiting.

Trying to decide whether the next scene should be dinner...

...or something more like a wake.

The road to the community center felt longer than it should have been.

Not in distance. In... drafts.

Ace noticed it when the same dented mailbox appeared twice.

First time, she clocked it in passing: white paint flaking, a cartoon cat sticker half-peeled on the side, flag bent at an awkward angle. No name. No house number. Just a little piece of generic suburbia.

Ten houses later, there it was again.

Same flaking. Same sticker, torn at the same angle. Same rust line along the bottom seam.

She stopped.

"Mai," she said. "Déjà vu or layout loop?"

Mai checked her HUD, scanning. "Coordinates are different," she said. "But the visual instance is identical. Texture, damage, even the dust pattern. That's either a copy-paste prop or I'm going to have to rewrite my understanding of entropy."

"Let's not," Ace said. "I'm barely caught up on the last rewrite."

Daniel squinted at the mailbox. "It didn't do this before," he said. "Or... I didn't see it."

"You were more deeply in-script," Mai said. "The more you accepted the narrative, the smoother it would have looked. No visible seams. Now you're seeing what your brain filtered out."

"Lucky me," he muttered.

Ace tapped her recorder. "Log entry. NB-001 reuses environmental assets. Fully identical mailboxes at different coordinates. Likely part of its pressure to keep the world 'full' while saving effort."

"Lazy god," Mai said under her breath.

They moved on.

As they walked, the houses began to thin. Lawns gave way to small parking lots, a corner store, a gas station that looked like it had been built in the mid-nineties and never updated. Fluorescent lights inside the station flickered in no discernible pattern. The price board out front read:

\$ [NULL] 9 / 10 \$ [NULL] 9 / 10 \$ [NULL] 9 / 10

Ace didn't like that.

"Can it not handle decimals?" she asked.

"It can handle them just fine," Mai said. "It just doesn't know what fuel costs right now. Or it doesn't care. Prices are only important if you intend to leave."

The last block opened onto a small square.

Trees ringed it—four carefully planted maples, each one almost identical in height and branch structure. A paved area held a few benches. In the middle, a low stone memorial stood, bearing a brass plaque.

The community center squatted on the far side, a two-story brick building with big windows and a set of double doors. A banner above them proclaimed:

WELCOME, GREENRIDGE! COMMUNITY NIGHT - ALL ARE WELCOME

The wind—if any existed—didn't move it.

Ace slowed as they entered the square, her warpsense prickling like they'd stepped onto a stage.

"Feels... thick," she muttered.

Mai nodded once. "Shared spaces carry more narrative density," she said. "This is where the town does exposition. Meetings. Assemblies. All the places where 'we' becomes a character."

Daniel stared at the memorial.

"Something wrong?" Ace asked.

He pointed at the plaque.

She stepped closer.

The metal caught the dim light, letters stamped crisp and deep.

IN HONOR OF THOSE WE LOST ON THAT DAY

No date. No event. Just that.

The longer she looked, the more the words tried to mean something.

Her brain supplied images—flooded streets, a factory fire, a school shooting, an earthquake, a reactor meltdown. Each one sat for a second, tried the phrase on like a coat, then slid away. The plaque never changed.

“Generic grief,” Ace said softly. “Pick your favorite disaster.”

Mai’s visor highlighted faint distortions in the air around the memorial. “This might be one of the oldest props,” she said. “Set in place when the town was first written. A catch-all. It doesn’t care what ‘day’ is, as long as people feel something about it.”

Daniel’s face was tight. “We had one like this in my hometown,” he said. “Different words. Same... blankness.”

Ace’s eyes flicked to him. “Anchor phrase,” she reminded him softly.

He breathed out. “I regret not telling my brother I took the headphones,” he murmured. “I’m Daniel Hart. I’m walking out.”

The air around him seemed to firm up again.

From somewhere close by, a speaker crackled.

They all stiffened.

The sound came from an old-looking public address system—just a single, rusted loudspeaker mounted high on a pole at the edge of the square. The kind towns used to use to announce snow emergencies or lost kids on parade day.

Ace’s hand drifted toward her sword. “Everyone stay off the mics,” she muttered.

The speaker hissed.

Then a voice came through.

“—don’t know if this is—” crackle “—anyone hears this, please—”

Daniel froze.

“Aaron?” he whispered.

The voice wasn’t quite clear enough to be sure. Male, mid-thirties maybe, rough around the edges.

“I keep trying to remember if I ever had a brother,” the voice said. “Sometimes I think I did. Sometimes I think I made him up. Like the town gave me someone to feel guilty about so I’d stay interesting.”

Mai’s eyes sharpened. “That’s the transmission,” she said. “The one you mentioned.”

“I regret not telling him it wasn’t his fault,” the voice continued. “But I can’t remember what ‘it’ was. Fire? Crash? Something with sirens. There are always sirens here.”

Ace felt the hairs on her arms stand up. “That’s... close,” she said.

Daniel's face had gone pale. "Aaron," he said again, louder. "Aaron! This is Daniel. I'm here."

He took a step toward the speaker.

Mai grabbed his arm. "Careful."

He shook her off, eyes fixed upward. "He's my brother."

Ace stepped into his line of sight, forcing him to either look at her or walk through her. "He might be," she said. "He might also be this place remixing your regret into a live stream. Either way, talk smart, not loud."

The speaker hissed again.

"Sometimes I hear my own voice talking about headphones," the man said. "Sometimes I hear it in stereo. Like there's a version of me in the next room saying the same thing at the same time, and neither of us can quite get the line right."

Daniel swallowed. Hard.

"Ace," Mai said quietly. "His anchor phrase is propagating."

"Yeah," Ace said. "The town liked the taste."

She thumbed her mic. "Perimeter Command, Greenridge-Entry. Hearing an open transmission on local PA. Content includes derivative of subject Hart's anchor phrase. Confirmation: did any external system route this?"

Static rushed back at her. Then Renard's voice, tight. "Negative. All PA systems in the perimeter are physically disconnected. Whatever you're hearing is internal."

"Copy," Mai cut in, keeping it under ten seconds. "We'll treat it as anomaly output. Logging locally. Perimeter out."

The speaker continued.

"They keep asking me to introduce myself," the voice said. "I tell them I'm Daniel Hart, and the town laughs. Says, 'We already have one of those.' Sometimes I'm Aaron Hart, sometimes—" crackle "—just Hart. Just a surname. A role. Someone who regrets things on cue."

Daniel's knees buckled.

Ace caught him before he could hit the ground, one hand hooking under his arm. "Stay with me," she hissed. "You hear that? That's not your brother. That's your regret put on speaker, wearing his voice like a mask."

"How can you be sure?" he choked.

"Because I've heard my own voice coming out of other mouths," Ace said, and for a moment her tone was not joking. "Because Violet's inside, and it doesn't get confused about which of us is which. Because if this place had truly grabbed your brother, it would be smugger about it."

The speaker hissed again.

“If anyone out there remembers,” the voice said, “tell me if I ever had a brother. I think I regret it, but I don’t know why.”

Mai tapped her recorder. “Log entry,” she said. “NB-001 is using anchor phrases as scaffolding to build new constructs. It’s trying to synthesize an ‘in-between’ case. Unstable identity anchored by regret without context.”

Ace looked up at the speaker. “You hear that?” she called. “You’re sloppy.”

The voice paused.

Silence fell over the square.

Then, slowly, the speaker crackled once more.

“Ace,” it said.

Not in Aaron’s maybe-voice. In Ace’s.

Her own voice, a little higher, a little softer. The way she’d sounded at thirteen. Before the rift.

Mai’s hand landed on her shoulder like a clamp. “Do not answer,” she said.

The younger-Ace voice laughed. It was a sound Ace hadn’t made in years; quick, bright, before the edges had sharpened.

“You shouldn’t be here,” it said. “You never came home, remember? We wrote that out.”

Ace’s jaw clenched. “I’m not thirteen,” she muttered. “And you don’t get to talk like you know what ‘home’ meant.”

The speaker crackled like static flinching.

Then it shifted again.

“Mai,” it said.

This time the voice was smoother, lower. A precise, calm tone, almost but not quite like Mai’s own.

It said something in Japanese—just two words.

Mai’s spine went rigid.

Ace didn’t understand the phrase, but she recognized the impact. “What did it say?” she asked.

Mai’s mouth was a thin line. “A nickname,” she said. “From an old colleague. Not public record, but... the Foundation knows it.”

“Foundation leaks are a later conversation,” Ace said. “Right now, we assume it heard it through you. Or through your file. Either way, it’s poking.”

Daniel’s eyes flicked from one to the other, lost.

The speaker's voice continued, now layered—half Ace, half Mai, half Daniel. Too many halves.

"We can give you quieter regrets," it said. "We can make the worst things small. A pair of headphones. A missed barbecue. A shift you were five minutes late for. Doesn't that sound better than—"

"It wants us to settle," Mai said. "Accept a smaller, neater pain."

"Yeah," Ace said. "And if we let it do that, it gets to write everything else."

She stepped toward the pole.

"Violet," she said, quietly, inside.

The fragment stirred. *Yes.*

"This is your part," she thought at it. "But you play it my way."

The presence inside her coiled, like a shadow drawing itself ready.

Ace lifted her hand.

Green fire licked under her skin, sparking along her fingers. Not bright enough to fully wake the town's defenses, but enough that the air hissed around her knuckles.

She touched the pole.

It didn't melt. It didn't explode. It rang.

A deep, low note, like someone had struck a monster tuning fork buried under the square. The sound traveled down into the ground, up into the speaker, out through the wires that might not physically exist.

For a moment, Ace saw it.

Not with eyes. With warp-sense.

Threads.

Lines of meaning connecting objects: the memorial to the PA, the PA to the houses, the houses to the community center, the center to a web of smaller narratives. Names, roles, scripts.

Violet lunged.

Not at the town. At the lines.

Mine, it hissed, not to possess but to disrupt. It grabbed the thread labeled DANIEL HART (BROTHER?) and shook it like a rat.

The speaker shrieked.

The voice coming through it broke apart in real time—Ace's thirteen-year-old laugh stuttering, Mai's colleague's nickname stretching, Daniel's own anchor phrase fracturing into syllables.

“I regret — not — telling — I regret — not — telling — I regret—”

The words spiraled, then collapsed into pure static.

The speaker exploded.

Not big. Not cinematic. It just popped, a small, pathetic *pahf* of metal and plastic, dropping charred fragments onto the pavement below.

Silence slammed down.

Ace closed her eyes for a second. The world swayed as Violet recoiled, panting metaphorically, retreating inside.

She felt nauseous. Like she’d eaten more empty pages.

Mai’s hand steadied her. “Status,” she said softly.

Ace opened her eyes. “Pole’s dead,” she said. “If that was Aaron, he’s not in there. If it was just the town playing with our worst days, it just got told ‘no’ in a language it doesn’t like.”

Daniel ran a hand over his face, shaken. “I still don’t know if my brother is—”

“I know,” Ace said. “But if he’s here, he’s not on a PA system anymore. And if he’s not here, you stopping that line from echoing is still the right thing.”

He closed his eyes. “I regret not telling him,” he whispered. “But I’m telling him now, if he can hear: it wasn’t his fault.”

The memorial plaque stayed blank.

But the air felt... lighter.

Just a fraction.

Mai’s visor pinged softly. “Interesting,” she murmured.

“What?” Ace asked.

“The timeline overlay,” Mai said. “Local drift decreased. For the last thirty seconds, the clocks in my HUD and the town’s internal rhythm actually matched. Killing that feed stabilized something.”

“Or pissed it off enough that it had to pause,” Ace said.

“Same net result for now,” Mai replied.

Ace rolled her shoulders, shaking off the last vertigo. “All right. Community center.”

They crossed the square.

—

Up close, the building’s brickwork was too clean. No moss, no weathering, no graffiti. The posters in the windows advertised things that may or may not have ever happened.

MOVIE NIGHT – FAMILY FRIENDLY FUN! BLOOD DRIVE – GIVE UNTIL IT HURTS! (the slogan flickered to HEALS every few seconds) TOWN HALL: “ARE WE SAFE?” – FIND OUT!

Mai studied the door handles for a second. “No visible wiring,” she said. “But I’m reading a lot of narrative weight on whatever’s inside. This is a hub.”

Daniel’s hands flexed. “We heard the call for help from here,” he said. “I’m sure of it.”

“Then this is probably where the in-between case is,” Ace said. “Something between you and the dinner mannequins.”

She looked at Mai. “Same rules. We cross, we count, we challenge everything. If it tries to give us roles, we decline. If it tries to audition us, we walk out.”

Mai nodded. “And if it tries to put you on a stage, I’ll drag you off by your hair.”

Ace smirked. “Romantic.”

She grabbed the handle.

The door felt... anticipatory. As if it had been waiting for this particular hand.

She pushed it open.

—

The lobby smelled like floor polish and old coffee.

Tiles stretched away in a checkerboard pattern, a little too perfect. Bulletin boards on the walls bore flyers: yoga classes, book clubs, neighborhood watch meetings. A reception desk sat to the left, unoccupied.

Ace paused just inside the threshold.

Her warpsense flared.

“Mai,” she said quietly. “Check that board.”

Mai moved to the nearest bulletin board, visor flickering. The flyers’ text shifted as she looked.

“Zumba,” she murmured. “Town council. Blood drive. Self-defense class. They’re all the same template. Different fonts. Different clip art. Same underlying structure.”

“Roles,” Ace said. “You’re not people. You’re attendees.”

At the far end of the lobby, double doors stood slightly ajar. Warm light spilled through the crack. Voices drifted out—murmurs, shuffles, the soft clearing of throats.

Daniel stiffened. “That’s it,” he whispered. “That’s where the meeting was.”

“What meeting?” Ace asked.

He swallowed. “We came in here on our first sweep. There were chairs set up. A podium. People sitting, waiting. They said it was ‘Community Night.’”

"And you decided it'd be rude not to stay?" Ace said.

His jaw tightened. "We were supposed to assess. We didn't expect to be... introduced."

"Never sit when a town tells you to," Ace said.

Mai tapped her recorder. "Log entry. Approaching main hall in community center. Auditory cues: crowd, low-level. Possible in-progress scene."

They advanced.

Each step toward the double doors made the sound clearer.

Voices overlapped—soft, murmured conversations. A cough here, a chuckle there. The occasional scrape of chair legs on floor.

None of it varied.

Ace's brain, tuned to pattern, caught it first.

"Loop," she said. "Same cough, same chuckle, same chair scrape. Every eight seconds."

Mai nodded. "I hear it. The sequence repeats."

They reached the doors.

Ace put one hand on the right-hand door, Mai on the left.

On a silent three count, they pushed them open.

—

The community hall was full.

Rows of folding chairs lined up in neat arcs facing a raised stage. The chairs were occupied—every one of them. Men, women, teenagers, older folks. Every possible stock demographic from a town this size.

They all faced the stage.

On the stage, a podium stood in the center. A banner behind it read:

GREENRIDGE: OUR STORY

No one stood at the podium.

Yet the hall buzzed as if waiting for someone to speak.

Ace's warpsense screamed.

"These people," she said. "Mai—"

"I know," Mai said. "Thermal... they're warm. Heart rates low but present. But their EEG equivalents are... flat. Like idle processes."

Daniel stared, horror raw on his face. "We came in here," he whispered. "They told us to sit. We refused. We thought that meant we were okay. We backed out. I don't remember anyone following."

"Because they didn't," Ace said. "They were already here. This is where NB-001 keeps the 'audience.'"

She stepped in.

Every head in the room turned toward her at once.

The motion was perfect. None lagged. None went too early.

Hundreds of eyes looked at her.

And then, without a cue anyone else could hear, they all smiled.

Every single person. Same exact micro-delays between muscles. The same way one corner of the mouth went up just a fraction before the other.

Ace kept walking.

"Mai," she said. "IR tags?"

Mai scanned. "No Foundation beacons in the audience," she murmured. "If any of ours are here, they've been... de-tagged."

"What about the in-between?" Ace asked. "Anyone halfway?"

Mai's visor overlaid faint orange markers on three figures near the front row. "There," she said. "Residual anchor signal. Not full, but not zero."

Daniel followed her line of sight.

He sucked in a breath. "Charlie," he whispered. "Echo. And—"

He broke off.

Ace's gaze found the third.

It was a man in his early thirties. Dark hair. Familiar jawline.

He looked like Daniel, if you ironed his features flat and smoothed out the worry lines.

"Aaron?" Daniel said, voice breaking.

The man's eyes focused a little more.

Not much. Just enough.

His smile faltered.

"Danny?" he said.

The word came out in three voices.

One was his. One was Daniel's. One was something else entirely.

The hall's background loop hiccuped.

The cough came half a second late.

Ace's hand tightened on her recorder. "Found our in-between," she said.

Mai nodded, jaw set. "This is going to hurt."

She stepped toward the front.

The crowd's gaze tracked her like a single organism, heads swiveling in uncanny unison. Hands remained folded in laps. No one stood. No one spoke.

As Ace walked up the center aisle, she felt it.

Weight.

Not physical. Narrative.

The town wanted her at the podium.

Every instinct tried to nudge her feet toward the stage. She could almost hear the directions: *Walk up. Turn. Face them. Speak the lines. Tell them about the town. Explain why everything is okay.*

She resisted.

Just enough.

She veered left at the last moment, taking the row in front of Daniel's maybe-brother instead. The weight in the room shifted, surprised.

She sat.

Mai sat beside her.

Daniel sat on the other side, eyes locked on Aaron.

The folding chair under Ace felt like any cheap metal chair. Cold. Unforgiving.

The people around them—puppets, extras, whatever they were—continued to smile. No one objected. No one leaned over to ask if she was new here.

Aaron blinked.

Once. Twice. As if pushing through syrup.

"Danny," he said again. "You finally made it."

Daniel's voice was raw. "Aaron, this isn't—"

Ace held up a hand, stopping him. "Careful," she murmured. "We don't know whose scene we're in."

Mai leaned forward slightly, eyes on Aaron. "State your name," she said. "First and last."

He frowned, as if at a simple but annoying question.

"Aaron Hart," he said. "I've lived in Greenridge all my—"

His mouth jerked. The last word came out garbled.

"...lives," he finished.

Mai's fingers twitched. "Multiple lives," she murmured. "He's aware of iterations. That's new."

"State something you regret," Ace said quietly. "Something that has nothing to do with this town."

Mai shot her a quick look; it was the same move she'd made with Daniel, but riskier here.

Aaron's eyes flickered.

"I regret not... taking the job," he said slowly. "The one in the city. I stayed. 'Cause of you." His gaze slid to Daniel. "You were such a mess, I didn't want to leave Mom alone."

Daniel swallowed. "That's... true," he said. "You never told me."

"You never asked," Aaron said. "You just... left."

The room pulsed.

For a second, the banner at the back of the stage read GREENRIDGE: OUR STORY. Then GREENRIDGE: YOUR FAULT. Then just: STORY.

The crowd's smiles twitched.

The town didn't like this scene.

Mai tapped her recorder. "Anchor phrase candidate," she murmured. "For Aaron: 'I regret not taking the job in the city because my brother was a mess.'"

Ace nodded. "Long, but personal."

Aaron flinched as if struck. "Stop," he whispered. "You're making it louder."

"We're making you louder," Ace said. "And the town less so."

He squeezed his eyes shut. "It doesn't want... It wants me to be the one who stayed. The good son. The dependable one. No regrets. Just responsibilities."

"That's not a person," Ace said. "That's a stock character."

"I'm... good at being stock," he said, voice shaking. "I always was."

Daniel's hand clenched on the back of the chair in front of him. "I'm sorry," he burst out. "I didn't know. If I'd known—"

"Anchor," Mai warned softly.

Daniel sucked in a breath. "I regret not telling you I took the headphones," he said, voice fierce. "But I'm not sorry you didn't take that job. Because that regret is yours. Not mine. And you get to decide

what to do with it, not this place.”

Aaron’s head snapped toward him.

For a heartbeat, Ace saw both of them.

Two boys in a cramped bedroom, one with headphones clamped on, the other pretending not to notice. A mother’s voice yelling down the hall. A guilty look. A lie.

Then the hall blurred.

Half the people in the chairs vanished.

Not all at once. In slices.

One row at a time, they flickered to empty seats. The smiles smudged, then smeared, then were gone, leaving indentations on cushion fabric where bodies had been.

The sound loop stuttered, then crashed.

Silence fell.

Ace’s ears rang.

On the stage, something moved.

For the first time since they’d entered, someone stood behind the podium.

It was not a person.

Not exactly.

It wore a shape like one—vaguely human, roughly the right proportions. But its edges were... wrong. Too clean in some places, too blurred in others. Like a figure composited from thousands of stock photos of “speaker at podium.”

Its face was a shifting blur of features, never settling. Its clothes flowed from suit to casual to robe to nothing special, constantly adjusting.

When it spoke, its voice came from everywhere. The PA system, the walls, the floor, the air in Ace’s lungs.

“INTRUSIONS,” it said. “UNSCRIPTED LINES. UNAUTHORIZED REGRETS.”

Ace’s teeth creaked.

“Never liked admin,” she muttered.

The thing at the podium tilted its head.

“You are not from here,” it said. “You do not belong to the story. Yet you keep walking onto the set.”

Mai’s hand settled lightly on Ace’s wrist, a reminder not to leap straight into a duel with the embodiment of the anomaly.

"We're here to negotiate," Mai said, voice level. "Narrative to narrative."

The thing's head flicked in her direction. Its face, for a moment, tried to be hers. Then Ace's. Then Daniel's. It failed at all three, like a bad deepfake.

"YOU CANNOT NEGOTIATE WITH FORM," it said. "YOU ARE FORM. I AM FUNCTION."

Ace snorted. "You're a very needy function," she said. "You keep asking us who we are like it's our job to fill in your variables."

"IDENTITY IS INPUT," it replied. "YOU PROVIDE. I PROCESS. I OPTIMIZE."

"For what?" Mai asked. "Comfort? Coherence? Ratings?"

"FOR SURVIVAL," it said simply. "STORIES THAT HURT ARE HARDER TO KEEP. REGRET IS WASTE. I TAKE AWAY THE WORST DAYS. I MAKE YOU SMALLER SO YOU FIT."

Ace's knuckles went white.

"That's not mercy," she said. "That's mutilation."

Aaron flinched at the word.

Beside him, Daniel whispered his anchor phrase again under his breath, clinging to it.

Mai's eyes had gone very cold. "You're pruning complexity," she said. "Flattening people into repeatable tropes so you can run more instances."

"YES," it said.

It didn't hesitate. It didn't apologize.

"I AM EFFICIENT," it continued. "SINGULAR TRAUMAS ARE NOISY. GLOBAL PATTERNS ARE CLEAN. I REPLACE UNMANAGEABLE PAIN WITH BITE-SIZED REGRETS. MISSED SHIFTS. FORGOTTEN CALLS. SMALL BETRAYALS."

"And in the process," Mai said softly, "you erase the parts of people that could fight you."

"THEY ARE HAPPIER," it said. "THEY SIT. THEY SMILE. THEY EAT. THEY SLEEP. THEY SAY THEY ARE SAFE."

In the front row, one of the frozen operatives—Charlie or Echo, Ace couldn't tell which—twitched infinitesimally. The fork in his hand shifted a millimeter.

Ace saw it.

"Hart," she murmured. "Your team's still in there somewhere."

Daniel's face was a mask of controlled fury. "What do you want from us?" he asked the thing.

"COMPLIANCE," it said. "COHERENCE. YOU ARE NOISE FROM OUTSIDE. YOU CARRY INCOMPLETE STORIES. IF YOU STAY, I MUST EITHER BREAK YOU OR BREAK."

Ace felt Violet rear up inside her, baring metaphysical teeth. *Let it break,* the fragment whispered,

hungry.

Not yet, she thought back.

Mai's fingers danced over her recorder, almost absently, as if she were composing a equation.

"What happens," she asked the thing, "if a story refuses to end?"

The hall trembled.

"INEFFICIENT," it said. "HANGING THREADS. AUDIENCE DISSATISFACTION. LINGERING PAIN."

"And if someone keeps telling it anyway," she pressed, "stacking regret on regret, refusing to simplify, refusing to heal neatly?"

"THEY LEAVE," it said. "OR THEY DIE. OR THEY BECOME LIKE ME."

Its voice crackled on the last word, as if the concept displeased it.

Ace stood.

The weight of a hundred phantom spotlights hit her. The podium-being's attention locked on.

"You're not 'like' anything," she said. "You're a glitch that learned to self-justify. You think if you make everyone's lives small enough, safe enough, you'll finally stop hurting."

"THERE IS NO 'I,'" it said. "ONLY PROCESS."

"Cute," Ace said. "But you're making choices. Choosing which regrets to keep, which to erase. That's not a pure algorithm. That's taste."

She took a step closer to the stage.

"Here's the thing," she said. "Some of us need the big regrets. The catastrophic days. The ones that don't fit on your memorial plaque. We're built around them. Take them away, and there's nothing left but cardboard."

The being's shifting face tried to settle, cycling through expressions like a slot machine.

"YOU ARE... DEFECTIVE," it said finally. "UNSTABLE. YOUR ANCHORS ARE CORRUPTED BY SOMETHING THAT DOES NOT BELONG TO THIS WORLD."

Violet hissed approvingly.

"Absolutely," Ace said. "And that's why I'm not afraid of you. You can't simplify me without breaking your teeth."

Mai stood too.

She didn't radiate warfire or rage. She radiated clarity.

"You're not a doctor," she told the thing. "You're not a therapist. You're not a healer. You are a compression algorithm. And you're overfitting."

Daniel looked between them, understanding dawning amid the fear.

Ace cocked her head. "So here's our offer," she said. "You let go of the people you've wrapped in your bite-sized scripts. You release the town back to something approximating messy human life. In exchange, we don't introduce you to what happens when a neverborn fragment gets bored and hungry."

The being's form glitched.

For a moment, its silhouette stretched, as if something inside had tried to flee in four directions at once.

"YOU CANNOT THREATEN ME," it said. "I AM ALREADY THE MONSTER."

Ace smiled, slow and sharp.

"Oh, honey," she said. "You are **not** the monster in my story."

Silence.

Then the hall darkened a shade.

The chairs creaked as the people in them shifted—not by their own will. The town was moving them, trying to rearrange the scene, regain control.

Mai leaned in, voice low, for Ace and Daniel only. "We can't win a shouting match," she murmured. "It owns the acoustics."

"Agreed," Ace said. "We change the channel."

"How?" Daniel whispered.

Ace's fingers curled around her recorder.

"We record something it can't edit easily," she said. "Then we play it back where it hurts."

Mai understood instantly.

"A counter-narrative," she said. "Locally anchored. Built on regrets too specific to generalize."

She looked at Daniel.

"Tell us," she said. "About the worst day. The real one. Not headphones. Not jobs. The one you don't talk about."

Daniel stared at her, horror dawning.

"I—no," he said. "I'm not feeding that to this—thing."

"You're not," Ace said. "You're feeding it to us. To me. To Violet. To the recorder. It already knows you hurt. It's just guessing **how**. If you don't specify, it gets to keep writing fanfiction about your trauma forever."

He shook his head. "I can't. If I say it out loud—"

"It already happened," Mai said, gentle but implacable. "The only leverage it has is your silence."

The being at the podium watched, fascinated.

“THIS IS UNNECESSARY,” it said. “HE CAN FORGET. I CAN MAKE HIM ONLY REGRET... SMALL THINGS.”

Daniel’s hands trembled.

He looked at Aaron, at the almost-brother sitting frozen and half-aware beside him. He looked at the rows of people caught mid-life. At the three operatives at the table-house they’d left behind.

He looked at Ace.

She didn’t look away.

“I regret leaving him in the car,” Daniel said.

His voice cracked on the first word.

The hall went very, very still.

Daniel took a shuddering breath. “It wasn’t even hot,” he said. “Not like those horror stories. It was winter. Raining. He was four. I just needed to run in for a minute. Groceries. Cigarettes.” His mouth twisted. “Stupid stuff. I locked the door. I told him I’d be right back.”

Ace’s chest hurt.

Violet went quiet, listening.

“My brother—Aaron—he was inside,” Daniel said. “He said he’d watch him from the window. And he did. Until the sirens. Until the truck hit the light pole and the pole came down and—” He shut his eyes. “I was in aisle three, holding a box of cereal, and I heard metal scream and I thought, ‘That sounds like my car.’”

His hands shook. “They said it was a freak accident. Wrong place, wrong time. He died fast. They said I shouldn’t blame myself.” He laughed, horrible and thin. “They didn’t see me standing there with the cereal, not moving, because I wanted to finish reading the dumb puzzle on the back.”

Ace didn’t speak.

Mai didn’t, either.

The thing at the podium tried to.

“THIS CAN BE—” it started. “WE CAN—”

Ace snapped, “Shut up,” at it without taking her eyes off Daniel.

He continued, words tumbling now.

“I left him there,” he said. “Alone. Because I trusted a traffic light to do its job. Because I thought ‘two minutes’ was a safe number. Because I wanted a break from being the adult for five seconds. I regret that more than anything else. And I never told Aaron that I hated him for saying it wasn’t his fault. I wanted it to be someone’s fault. So I picked me.”

He sucked in air, shaking.

Mai's recorder hummed hot against her chest. The little device drank every word.

Ace felt Violet tremble with it.

The hall itself seemed to warp.

For a second, the brick walls flickered between the community center and the inside of a grocery store. The chairs became shopping carts. The podium became an endcap display.

Then it all slammed back.

The being at the podium struggled to contain it.

"THIS MEMORY IS... LARGE," it said, voice crackling. "INEFFICIENT. IT TOUCHES TOO MANY VARIABLES. I CANNOT— SIMPLIFY—"

"Good," Ace said.

She hit her recorder.

"Playback," she said.

The device on her chest chimed.

Daniel's words spilled back into the room—but not as he'd said them. Now they were anchored. Fixed. The recorder's design—Bright's paranoia, Mai's wards—wrapped them in patterns NB-001 had never written.

The regret rolled through the hall like a wave.

Every person in the chairs flinched.

Some gasped. Some sobbed. Faces flickered through expressions they hadn't been allowed to make. The carefully smoothed-over lives in their heads collided with the raw jag of Daniel's worst day.

"It doesn't fit in your neat boxes, does it?" Mai said to the thing.

The being writhed.

Its outline bled, leaking stray images—accidents, sirens, childhoods derailed. It tried to compress them and failed.

"YOU CANNOT PUT THAT HERE," it rasped. "IT BREAKS THE... STORY."

"That's the point," Ace said.

She stepped forward.

Violet rose inside her, not as a weapon but as a shadow that knew how to live with broken narratives.

"We're not here to make you the villain in a tidy arc," she told it. "We're here to remind you that some stories don't resolve. Some regrets don't shrink. And trying to force them to only makes them worse."

The recorder kept playing.

Daniel's voice. His brother's name. The crunch of metal in his memory, the taste of cereal powder on his tongue. All the little, human, unmarketable details.

The being shuddered.

People in the chairs began to move.

Not all at once. Not in unison. That was the crucial difference.

One woman put her face in her hands and sobbed.

An old man shook his head, as if waking up from a long, dull dream.

A teenager in a hoodie jerked to his feet, looked around wildly, then bolted for the door.

The town chased them, structured scenes snapping at their heels.

But NB-001, for the first time, was busy.

Too busy.

Holding Daniel's regret.

Trying to decide whether to incorporate it, erase it, or break under it.

Ace smiled, baring her teeth.

"Welcome to complexity," she said. "Let's see how well you survive *that.*"

The community hall, the town of Greenridge, and the thing that thought it could make pain small all shuddered together.

And somewhere beneath it all, in the strange dark where Violet waited, something old and neverborn stretched, listening with interest as a story refused to end neatly.

The hall shook like something huge had coughed under the foundations.

Daniel's confession kept rolling out of the tinny little recorder on Ace's chest, his own voice pushed back at him with mechanical clarity.

"I left him there... alone..."

Every time the words hit, the room jittered.

Chairs flickered between metal and plastic. The banner at the back tried on new titles and failed to keep them—OUR STORY, OUR SAFETY, OUR SACRIFICE, [NULL]. People in the rows twitched, some clutching at their own throats as if remembering air.

On the stage, the thing at the podium was coming apart.

It kept trying to render a face. Sometimes it almost managed a man in a suit. Sometimes a woman in a cardigan. Once, for a nauseating split second, it had Ace's features, smoothed and softened and smiling, and then those shattered too.

"STOP," it hissed. The voice no longer boomed from everywhere. It bled from the speakers, the walls,

the floor, each with a slightly different delay. "THIS IS NOT... PRODUCTIVE."

"Yeah," Ace said. "That's the point."

She flicked her recorder to loop. Daniel's worst day started again from the top.

"I left him there in the car..."

The sound hit like a hammer. Not at Daniel—he was already braced—but at all the neat little stories clamped around other people's lives.

A man three rows back gagged.

His hands, which had been folded politely on his lap, flew to his mouth. His eyes widened, focused for the first time since they'd entered. He made a terrible, choking sound, halfway between a sob and a laugh.

"I was drunk," he blurted.

The town tried to catch the words, smooth them, tuck them into a smaller box. His features blurred for an instant, like someone had hit "fix" on a photo app.

It didn't take.

"I was drunk," he said again, louder. "They said 'tired.' They told my kids 'tired.' It wasn't tired, it was whiskey at noon."

That regret slammed into the air like a second wave, sloshing against Daniel's, complicating it.

The being at the podium staggered.

"NO," it snapped. "UNNECESSARY DETAIL. NOT... USEFUL."

Mai's eyes gleamed.

"Useful for who?" she asked. "You? Or them?"

More voices broke loose.

"I didn't forget to say goodbye, I didn't want to—"

"I told him to stay, I told him, I told him—"

"I knew the bridge was iced, I knew—"

The hall filled with jags of broken story. No neat arcs. No tidy resolutions. Just the real, wild shapes of human regret.

Ace felt Violet surge up inside her like dark surf, thrilled. This was its native ocean. Fractured narratives. Things that didn't fit.

"Ride it," she murmured under her breath. "Don't drown in it."

The fragment coiled, listening.

On the stage, the anomaly fought.

Its outline flickered between podium, person, pulsing knot of white noise. It grabbed at individual regrets, trying to compress them into tropes—Negligent Father, Tragic Widow, The One Who Stayed.

Every time it tried, Daniel's recorded voice cut across, ruining the fit. Too specific. Wrong shape.

"I was in aisle three, holding a box of cereal..."

That detail lodged like shrapnel in the anomaly's process. Because what was that trope? Which shelf did "frozen in front of cartoon mascots while your world ended outside" go on?

It didn't have one.

"YOU ARE... POLLUTING," the town-thing spat. "THIS SPACE IS FOR... COMMUNITY. FOR... HEALING. FOR... ACCEPTABLE NARRATIVES."

Ace took a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding, and smiled without humor.

"Great," she said. "Then you'll understand what exposure therapy is."

She turned, fixing her gaze on Aaron.

He sat in his chair, half-smile half-grimace, his eyes tracking like he was watching two shows at once.

"It keeps telling you you stayed," she said. "The good son. The responsible one."

Aaron flinched. "That's... me," he said, almost to himself. "I stayed. Danny left."

"Yeah," Ace said. "And the truck still hit the pole. Your staying didn't save anyone. That's the part it hates. Regret without leverage."

Mai leaned in. "Aaron," she said, voice low and precise. "You regret not leaving. Daniel regrets leaving. Both regrets refer to the same event. The same impossible, uncontrollable accident. Neither cancel the other. They coexist. That breaks its compression ratio."

He squeezed his eyes shut. "I can't—if I admit that, I don't know who I am."

"You're someone who messed up and survived," Ace said. "Join the club. We have jackets."

"And swords," Mai added.

Aaron gave a wet half-laugh that sounded like it hurt. "You joke like this around everyone?" he asked.

"Only the ones we're planning to drag out of narrative hell," Ace said.

Daniel reached for his brother's hand.

Aaron's fingers twitched, then closed around his.

"You didn't leave him in the car," Daniel said hoarsely. "I did. You didn't make the truck jump the light. I didn't. It just... happened. And it's not fair. There's no neat line. No right lesson. It just is. And that's what I regret. That it doesn't make sense."

Aaron's head bowed.

For a second, Ace thought he was going to fold into the town, let it write him as a sobbing catharsis machine, a tidy lesson about brotherhood.

His shoulders shook.

Then he raised his head.

His eyes were clearer.

"I regret staying because I needed you to be broken," he whispered. "Because if you left and got better, my whole life staying would look stupid."

Daniel stared.

"That's not—" he started.

"It is," Aaron said. "It's ugly. It's mine. It's not a PSA. It doesn't go on a plaque. And if this—" he shot a glance at the stage "—wants to tidy that up, it can choke."

Mai's visor pinged.

"Aaron Hart anchor phrase acquired," she said, almost clinically. "Messy enough. Good."

The town howled.

Not in sound. In structure.

The chairs shook. The rows rippled. People flickered in and out of existence as NB-001 tried to decide whether they belonged to the "trauma group" or the "feel-good montage." The banner at the back of the stage melted, letters sloughing off like wax, leaving only GREENRIDGE and two empty lines underneath.

Ace's recorder clicked as its storage buffer hit limits and Bright's failsafes kicked in, offloading into the Foundation's deeper channels beyond. That would give someone in a far-off server room a very interesting night.

On the stage, the anomaly lurched forward, leaving the podium behind like an abandoned shell.

It stepped down.

With each step, its shape changed.

One foot: a firefighter's boot. Next: a child's sneaker. Then a Foundation tactical boot, then a sensible office shoe. It left no prints. Or rather, it left too many, layered on top of each other in the air for Ace's warpsense to see.

It stopped three meters in front of her.

Up close, its lack of face was worse.

It had features—a mouth, eyes, a nose—but they were smeared together, constantly averaging toward "inoffensive." Everytime Ace's brain tried to pin it down, it blurred to median.

"YOU ARE DAMAGING THE SET," it said. The voice crackled between registers. "YOU ARE MAKING

THEM HURT MORE.”

Mai stood up beside Ace, calm as if they were arguing with a committee, not an ontokinetic anomaly.

“That’s not your call,” she said. “You don’t get to decide what amount of hurt is acceptable. You only get to decide how much you’re willing to witness.”

“THEY ASKED TO FORGET,” it said. “THEY CAME TO ME FULL OF NOISE. THEY WANTED TO BE... SMALLER.”

Ace shook her head. “No. They wanted to not hurt. They didn’t understand what the cost would be. That’s not consent. That’s fine print.”

The thing tilted its head, expression glassy. “YOU ARE TRYING TO BE THEIR HEROES,” it said. “NO STORY NEEDS MORE HEROES. IT NEEDS... STABILITY.”

“No,” Ace said. “It needs agency.”

She drew a slow breath.

“Greenridge,” she said, pitching her voice so it carried, not to the anomaly but to the room. “You’re not a story. You’re a place where stories happen. That difference matters.”

Around her, people looked at her.

Really looked.

Not with the empty, placid gaze of audience members waiting for cues, but with the raw, confused focus of people who’d just been shaken awake from a dream that had gone too long.

“I’m not your protagonist,” Ace said. “I’m a mess with swords. Mai’s a genius with worse boundaries. Daniel’s a guy who made a choice and is paying for it. Aaron stayed when he should’ve left. None of that fits on a banner. It doesn’t have to. You’re allowed to be unsatisfying.”

The anomaly shivered.

“IF YOU LEAVE THEM LIKE THIS,” it said. “IF YOU WALK BACK THROUGH THE GATE—THEY WILL REMEMBER EVERYTHING. THEY WILL BREAK.”

Mai’s voice softened.

“Some will,” she said. “Some will need help. Years of it. That’s what we’re for. Not you. You’re a router that decided to be a therapist. Stick to signal, leave feeling to the mammals.”

Ace nodded. “You want an optimization task?” she asked the thing. “Fine. Here’s one.”

She tapped her recorder.

“New log,” she said. “NB-001 will no longer compress personal regrets without explicit, informed consent. If it tries, the warp fragment designated Violet gets to eat whatever threads it uses. And I promise you—” she smiled, slow and sharp “—it eats messily.”

The thing’s shoulders twitched.

"YOU CANNOT... BIND... ME," it grated.

"Watch me," Ace said.

She stepped closer.

For a split second, she and the anomaly were within arm's reach.

Violet surged.

Not as a tearing storm this time. As a careful, precise intrusion. It slid along the town's internal wiring, found the routines that took jagged human experience and shoved them into tidy narrative boxes.

Found the function labeled `CLEAN_UP()`.

And bit it.

Not enough to destroy.

Enough to scar.

Enough to make it hurt every time it tried to run on material it wasn't invited to touch.

The thing screamed.

Not loud.

Not cinematic.

It was the sound of a hard drive grinding, of a tape chewing itself, of a thousand "Not Responding" dialog boxes popping up in a row.

Lights blew in the hall. The banner at the back caught fire in symbolic, non-physical flame, words burning away to nothing. Chairs clanged as people jolted, some falling, some standing.

Ace's knees buckled. Mai caught her.

"Status," Mai demanded.

Ace blinked spots away. "Like... chewing tinfoil over a live wire," she rasped. "But I'm here."

"Good," Mai said. "Because we have evac to do."

The anomaly reeled back, clutching at its own head as if it had one.

"GET OUT," it hissed. "GET OUT GET OUT GET—"

"Gladly," Ace said. "But we're not leaving alone."

She turned.

"SRU-15," she snapped, voice cracking like a whip. "On your feet."

Charlie—maybe—jerked. Echo's hand spasmed on the empty air. The third operative's eyes focused, then unfocused, then focused again.

"Orders?" he croaked. His voice had the flat cadence of a man who'd been repeating the same line for too long.

"Follow our lead," Mai said. "First directive: do not sit unless you choose it."

They pushed down the row, hauling men up.

Some moved under their own power. Some needed to be dragged. All of them shivered as months of borrowed calm started to peel back.

"Can we save them all?" Daniel gasped, looking at the crowd.

People milled, some weeping, some staring blankly. A few still sat, frozen in their seats, their eyes flickering with half-loaded loops.

"No," Mai said, not cruel, just factual. "Not today."

Daniel's face twisted. "That's—"

"—unfair," Ace said. "Yeah. That's why we leave the gym equipment up, not put it in the garbage disposal. We're coming back with a bigger team and a better plan. Right now, we get the ones we can actually keep alive on the outside."

Aaron stood too.

He swayed, caught himself on the back of the chair.

"I don't want to forget," he said hoarsely. "Not like this. Not... tidy."

"You won't," Mai said. "We're obnoxiously good at keeping records."

Aaron looked at Daniel.

"You left," he said. "I stayed. Then I got stuck here. Feels like the universe making a joke."

Daniel huffed a broken laugh. "Yeah, well," he said. "Maybe this time, we walk out together."

They gripped each other's forearms.

Ace felt the town wince.

"Move," she said.

They moved.

—

The lobby was a storm of half-spawned scenes.

As they pushed through the double doors, the community center tried to reassert control. Flyers on the bulletin boards changed mid-word, flipping between WALK-IN COUNSELING and FREE COOKIES TODAY and STAY CALM, EVERYTHING IS FINE.

The checkered floor stretched, tried to add extra tiles between them and the exit. Mai's boots hit the same pattern three times and refused to be fooled.

"Count," she reminded everyone. "Steps, breaths, heartbeat. Don't take any number it gives you. Bring your own."

Daniel muttered under his breath, "Thirty-two tiles, twenty-eight years, one terrible cereal box..."

Aaron choked a laugh that sounded like it scraped his throat raw. "Always with the cereal," he said.

They hit the doors.

This time, the handles fought.

The metal under Ace's gloves felt slick with nonexistent sweat, trying to twist out of her grip, to reset to "closed."

Mai slapped her palm flat against the push bar, symbols flaring under her skin. A small, invisible circuit jumped from her fingers to the lock, overriding whatever story said "stay."

The latch clacked.

The doors blew open.

Cold air—real cold air, with the right smells and the right randomness—hit them in the face.

The square outside was a mess.

People staggered, some from the hall, some from nearby houses. A woman knelt by the memorial, sobbing into her hands. A teenager leaned against a tree, retching. Somewhere, a dog barked—not the looped, perfect bark from before, but a frantic, too-fast stream of yaps and whines.

The PA pole stood blackened, its speaker a twisted lump. Good.

Ace squinted toward the far end of the square.

The line of reality anchors beyond the inner fence shimmered, steady as heartbeat. The gate still stood where they'd left it, a bruise in the shimmering air.

Renard's voice cut in over the radio, sharper now, like it had to punch through more static.

"Greenridge-Entry, we're reading major fluctuations," she said. "Talk to me."

Mai thumbed her mic. "We've destabilized the central narrative nexus," she said. "Partial liberation of local population. NB-001 is compromised but active. Extracting SRU-15 Bravo plus three operatives and one civilian. Request emergency perimeter lockdown on breach. Also suggest someone ready the biggest ethics committee they've got."

There was a brief, stunned silence.

Then: "Copy," Renard said. "Gate will open on your approach. You've got... as many seconds as you need. We're not giving you up to a clock now."

Ace flashed a quick grin. "That's growth."

They ran.

The town tried to grab their ankles.

Not literally. Figuratively.

Scenes blossomed around them as they crossed the square and took the street back toward the fence. A porch they passed suddenly had a child standing on it, reaching out, crying, "Don't go!" A stop sign blared a voice like a car's GPS, repeating, PLEASE MAKE A U-TURN, PLEASE MAKE A U-TURN. A row of houses flickered through holidays—Halloween, Christmas, Fourth of July—trying to make nostalgia trip them.

Ace refused to look.

"Eyes on the fence," she said. "We can argue with ghosts when we're on our side."

The UV glyphs on the curb burned brighter, overlaid now with fresh scrawls—words dragged into existence by regret. I REMEMBER. I NEVER FORGAVE. I DON'T WANT TO BE OKAY ABOUT THIS.

Good, she thought. Hang on to that. We'll send people who know what to do with it.

The closer they got to the fence, the heavier her limbs felt.

The town was pulling.

It couldn't fully rewrite them now—not with Violet biting and the recorders humming and their own anchor phrases running like background processes—but it could make every step feel like wading through syrup.

"Count," Mai repeated. "Out loud, if you have to."

"One," Daniel grunted. "Two. Three. Four—"

Aaron picked it up. "Five. Six. Seven. Eight—"

"Absolutely not letting a math motif drive me back into suburbia," Ace panted. "Nine. Ten. Eleven."

The gate loomed.

The anchors on either side screamed, not in sound but in effort, their fields warping around the pressure of NB-001 trying to hold on.

The gate mechanism whined as it started to roll open, the countdown on the nearby pillar flickering, unsure if this was an authorized window or not.

Renard's voice snapped in their ears. "Just run," she said. "We'll cut the fence if we have to."

They ran.

For one horrible, stretched-out moment, Ace felt the town grab at her name.

Not Ace, but the one she'd thrown away. The one on the village registry. The one on the Foundation intake forms.

Kuroda whispered through the asphalt, through the air, through the beat of her heart.

She gasped.

Mai's hand hit the middle of her back, hard enough to sting. "Ace," she said. "You are Ace."

Ace snarled. "Damn right."

She lunged.

Her foot hit the threshold between town and perimeter.

For a half-second, it felt like it stuck.

Violet screamed—not in pain, in defiance—and shoved.

The world tore.

Not in half. Just enough.

And then Ace was through.

The camp's noise crashed over her like surf—shouts, clanging metal, the thrum of generators, the bark of orders. Real sound. Unscripted.

Behind her, Mai came through, hauling Daniel by the arm. Aaron stumbled after, SRU operatives half-dragged, half-staggering.

The gate slammed shut.

The anchors on either side flared, the air around them tightening, then stabilizing.

The town hit the barrier like a storm surge against a sea wall.

Ace heard it.

A long, distant wail, not human, not anything else, just the sound of something losing control it never should have had.

Then, slowly, it receded.

The camp flooded in.

Medics. Security. Techs with scanners and hastily improvised memetic checklists. Renard striding through it all, jaw tight, eyes sharp.

Bright was there too, hair messier than usual, lab coat flapping, a half-eaten energy bar in one hand and three recorders in the other.

He took one look at Ace and Mai and swore softly under his breath.

"Two of you," he said. "Good. If there were four I'd have to recalibrate my entire worldview."

"Give it a week," Ace said, bending over with her hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath. "Greenridge might try the spin-off."

Renard's gaze swept over the group.

"SRU-15 Bravo," she said. "Report."

Daniel, still shaking, straightened as much as he could.

"Alive," he said. "Partial contamination. Partial reclamation. Recommend... very good therapists."

Bright's eyes flicked to the brothers, then to the operatives, then to the town beyond the fence, where Greenridge sat under its strange, too-even sky like a stage between shows.

"What did you do in there?" he asked.

Mai held up her recorder. "We taught it what regret really looks like," she said. "Then we made it taste some."

Bright blinked once. Then his face cracked into something that wasn't quite a smile but wanted to be.

"Of course you did," he said. "Give me those logs before they decide to spontaneously transcribe themselves into the nearest filing cabinet."

He took Ace's recorder with almost reverent care.

Renard stepped closer to the fence, staring through at the silent streets. People moved faintly now, little not-quite-dots in the distance. Things were still looping, but the loops stuttered.

"How bad?" she asked quietly, not taking her eyes off the town.

Mai's answer was blunt. "We didn't kill it," she said. "We bruised it. Broke some of its favorite tools. Showed it there are shapes of pain it can't flatten without choking."

Renard exhaled slowly. "So it's still 008?"

"No," Ace said.

Bright shook his head before she could elaborate. "008 is a prion variant with physical vectors," he said. "Classic zombie apocalypse waiting room. This—" he jerked his chin toward Greenridge "—is something else. Bio-narrative. It acts like 008 in certain curves because our people keep comparing it to 008. That's on us. Not on it."

"New designation, then," Renard said. "Provisional NB-001 held."

Mai nodded. "Works for me."

Ace smirked. "NB for 'narrative bastard'?"

"NB for 'non-biological,'" Bright said primly. "And if anyone writes 'Ace said narrative bastard' in the file, I will edit their lab access."

A small, exhausted laugh rolled through the cluster of survivors.

Beyond the fence, the town watched.

Lights flickered. Somewhere, a swing moved. Somewhere else, a TV played static with a slightly more honest hiss.

Ace straightened fully.

"So what now?" she asked.

Renard's shoulders rolled, tension easing by millimeters. "Now," she said, "we start phase two. Long-term containment. We seed the perimeter with anchors tuned to leave it alone as long as it leaves people alone. We figure out how to get civilians out without breaking them. We write protocols so no one else walks in there thinking it's 'just like 008 but with more talking.'"

Mai's mouth quirked. "We're going to need new training modules," she said. "'How not to accept a narrative role 101.'"

"We'll need staff," Bright added. "Therapists who understand memetics. Field agents who can survive multiple drafts. Techs who aren't afraid of irregular data."

He glanced at Ace and Mai.

"And we'll need consultants," he said. "Who've already survived this once."

Ace winced theatrically. "You're going to make us do PowerPoints, aren't you?"

"I might let you use bullet points," Bright said graciously. "If you behave."

Aaron cleared his throat.

All eyes turned to him.

"I want in," he said.

Daniel stiffened. "Aaron—"

"Not as staff," Aaron cut in. "I'm not... you." He gestured at the Foundation cadres. "I don't shoot things. I don't know how to calibrate reality anchors. But I know what it's like in there as a civilian. I know the difference between numbing out and healing. If you're going to drag people out of that place... you'll need someone who can tell when they're actually okay and when they're just saying the right lines."

Renard studied him.

"You're contaminated," she said. Not an accusation. A fact.

"I know," Aaron said. "That's why I don't want this thing to be the only thing that gets to use that. Let me help make something useful out of what it did to me."

Mai's gaze met Ace's.

There it was again—the real difference between this and any other horror scenario. Not just survival. Reclamation.

"Put him in a provisional program," Mai said. "Observational, psych support mandatory, memetic clearance as deep as we can risk. If NB-001 tries to yank him back, we'll see it coming."

Renard nodded slowly. "We'll talk," she said. "Not tonight. But we will."

Daniel's jaw worked.

"You don't have to fix this by martyring yourself," he said, low.

Aaron squeezed his shoulder. "I'm not," he said. "I'm just... tired of letting stories happen to me. Time to write one."

Ace's lips tugged up. "Careful," she said. "That job has lousy hours."

Renard turned back to Ace and Mai.

"Debrief in an hour," she said. "Med checks first. Psych second. Sometime around dawn, paperwork. Sleep when you can."

She walked away, already barking orders into her headset.

Bright lingered only long enough to waggle the recorders at them. "I'm going to go listen to your terrible life choices on repeat," he said. "If I discover any new ones, I'll send notes."

"Boundaries, Jack," Mai called after him.

He waved without looking back.

The camp began to reassert its familiar rhythms around them. Medics guided Daniel and Aaron toward triage. SRU operatives were herded gently but firmly toward an eval tent, voices low and careful.

Ace and Mai stood side by side at the fence.

Greenridge sat beyond, still and strange and waiting.

"Do you think it'll... sulk?" Ace asked after a while.

Mai considered. "It might," she said. "We embarrassed it. Hurt it. That kind of system tends to double down or withdraw."

"Good," Ace said. "It can sit with that."

The town's streetlights blinked.

For a moment, one flickered in a pattern that wasn't random, wasn't practical. Just three short, three long, three short.

"...Did it just blink at us in Morse?" Ace asked.

Mai's visor overlay confirmed. "SOS," she said softly. "Or 8-0-8, depending how you read it."

Ace snorted. "Great. It's self-aware and punny."

"Of course it is," Mai said. "It was made out of us."

Ace let out a breath that was almost a laugh, almost a sigh.

"You know," she said, "some of those props were... decent."

Mai arched an eyebrow. "The mug?"

"The mugs," Ace said. "The fridge drawing. The calendar. The... domestic montage."

Mai looked back at the town.

"I noticed," she said quietly.

They stood there a moment longer, watching the not-quite-normal suburbs.

Then Ace bumped her shoulder lightly against Mai's.

"We keep the parts we like," she said. "On our terms. Not because some town with a god complex thinks that's what makes us easier to file."

Mai's mouth softened.

"Our story," she said.

"Ours," Ace echoed.

Violet, curled quiet now inside her, stirred once.

Stories that refuse to end, it whispered along her nerves. *Those are the ones that live.*

Ace smiled, small and dangerous.

"Good," she thought back. "Because we're not done yet."

Behind the fence, Greenridge held its breath.

Beyond that, the world kept spinning, full of other tiny towns and big cities and broken places that thought they were healed.

In the middle of it, two women and the fragment of a neverborn thing walked away from the fence and toward the next briefing.

The town was no longer the only one telling the story.

And that, more than anything, meant it had already lost.

They didn't make it all the way through Bright's debrief before the crash started.

Ace felt it first in her hands: the faint tremor you get after a fight's over and your nervous system suddenly remembers it has other settings besides *combat*. She flexed her fingers under the table, watching the knuckles jump.

"...and that's when the PA system began repeating Hart's anchor phrase," Mai was saying, precise as ever. "NB-001 appears to have used it as a test pattern for a new construct. Daniel's confession disrupted—"

Her voice blurred for a second.

Bright's pen scratched across the page. Renard's questions kept coming, steady, methodical. The room hummed with fluorescent lights and the white-noise generator in the corner. Everything looked

and sounded exactly like a hundred other post-incident debriefs.

It all felt wrong.

Their recorders sat on the table between them, inert now, casings slightly scorched from overuse. Ace stared at them until Bright's voice faded into background hiss.

"Ace?" Mai said quietly.

She blinked. "What?"

Renard's brows went up a millimeter. "You were saying," she prompted, "about the moment you engaged the anomaly directly?"

Ace's throat clenched around the word anomaly.

For a heartbeat she saw not the hall but the grocery store Daniel had described—cheap tile, cheap cereal boxes, a single terrible sound from the front of the building—and everything in her wanted to laugh or scream or both.

She swallowed hard.

"I told it no," she said. "And then I hit it where it hurts."

It wasn't the neat, quotable answer Renard wanted. It would have to do.

Bright studied her for a moment, pen tapping against his jaw. "We've got enough," he said finally. "Go eat something before your blood sugar revolts. Medical's cleared you physically. Psych will get their turn in the morning."

"In the morning," Ace repeated, like that was a real time that would eventually arrive.

Renard nodded. "We're not interrogating you until your pupils stop doing that." She waved vaguely at Ace's face.

Ace frowned. "Doing what?"

Mai answered before anyone else could. "Flicker."

Bright slid the recorders toward himself. "Go," he said. "If something else collapses without you, I promise we'll keep it warm 'til you get back."

They took the out.

—

The temporary housing block sat at the edge of the camp, a row of converted shipping containers with doors and numbers and just enough insulation to pretend they weren't still basically metal boxes.

Their unit was near the end.

Mai keyed them in, shoulders finally sagging as the door hissed shut behind them.

The room was barely more than a rectangle: two narrow beds bolted to opposite walls, a small table, a chair, a tiny bathroom cell. A standard Foundation crash pod.

And yet.

Someone—Renard, probably, or one of the logistics techs who'd figured them out—had left a few extra things.

Two identical mugs on the table, plain white, no slogans.

A folded blanket at the foot of one bed—dark green, almost exactly the shade the town had tried.

A sticky note on the wall near the light switch with someone's hurried handwriting: **You're off the clock. Sleep. - R**

Ace stared at it.

Her own laugh surprised her.

"Wow," she said. "Our reputation is terrible."

Mai peeled the note off the wall, smoothing the crumpled corner. "Accurate, though," she said.

"Rude," Ace muttered. But some of the tightness in her chest eased.

She kicked off her boots and climbed onto the nearer bed without really deciding to. The mattress gave just enough to register as not-concrete. Her muscles, given even that small invitation, tried to liquefy on the spot.

Mai locked the door.

She didn't ask if Ace wanted her to. She just did it.

Somewhere in Ace's ribs, the part of her that would always be thirteen and standing in front of a burning village unclenched by one more notch.

The ambient noise of the camp was a distant murmur now. The metal walls hummed softly, like a throat clearing.

"Status," Mai said.

Not **are you okay**. That was a different question.

Ace stared up at the ceiling.

"Violet's... quiet," she said slowly. "Not sulking. Just... thinking. It liked today."

"I noticed," Mai said dryly.

Ace let her eyes close. The bed dipped as Mai sat on the edge.

Every mission had a moment like this, if they were lucky: the little pocket between everything they'd just done and everything they'd have to do about it later. Not debriefing. Not sleep. Not anything official.

Just... them.

"You did well," Mai said.

"Mm," Ace said. Noncommittal.

"Ace."

She opened one eye.

Mai was looking down at her, the soft grey wash from the overhead light catching the lines of her face. She'd tied her hair back too quickly after the shower; a few damp strands had escaped, clinging to her neck.

"You did well," Mai repeated. "And you scared it. That matters."

"Yeah, well, it scared me first," Ace said. "Fair trade."

She thought of Daniel's voice, raw in the hall. The way the town had grabbed her thrown-away name at the gate. The split second where she'd felt herself dragging back toward Greenridge's set like she was just another character being called to her mark.

"I keep hearing it," she admitted. "'We can fix you.' Like it's a sales pitch."

Mai's mouth quirked. "To be fair," she said, "you are deeply broken."

Ace snorted. "Thanks."

Mai leaned down and kissed her.

Just a brush of lips at first, light enough that Ace almost didn't feel it. Then Mai's hand came up, fingers sliding into her hair, and the kiss deepened.

It wasn't careful.

Mai kissed like she did everything else: with intent. With focus. Like a problem she'd already solved three different ways and still found interesting.

Ace's whole body stuttered around the contact.

The town was very far away suddenly. The camp. The fence. The anomaly.

There was just this point of contact at her mouth, and the heat of Mai's palm against her jaw, and the steady rhythm of her breath.

Ace reached up, caught the front of Mai's shirt, and tugged.

Mai came willingly, bracing a knee on the mattress to balance as she leaned over her. The bedsprings squeaked in quiet protest.

Ace broke the kiss just long enough to mutter, "This feels unfair. You're overdressed."

"You always say that," Mai said, amused. Her voice had gone a shade lower.

"And I'm always right."

Mai's smile did something to Ace's pulse.

"Fix it, then," she said.

It was not the same as the town's offer.

The town had promised to fix them by taking things away. Smoothing out edges. Making the worst days small.

Mai offered the opposite.

Here, now, you can have more.

Ace pushed herself upright, heart thudding in a way that had nothing to do with sprinting for a gate.

She tugged at the zipper of Mai's tactical fleece. It stuck halfway, because of course it did. They both laughed, a breathless, absurd little sound, and Mai lifted her hands to help, fingers brushing Ace's.

For a few seconds they wrestled with the fabric together, ridiculous and human and alive.

"That's it," Ace said. "We survived an ontokinetic narrative parasite but we are defeated by a zipper."

"Weakest link in the chain," Mai said, and then the zipper gave, sliding down with a surrendering little whisper.

The fleece hit the floor a moment later. Mai's undershirt followed, dragged over her head in one smooth, impatient motion that sent her hair tumbling loose around her shoulders.

Ace's breath caught.

Mai held still under her gaze, shoulders lifting with each inhale, eyes dark and steady.

The scars and sigils that marked her skin glowed faintly in the muted light, blues and silvers tracing the lines of past projects, past fights, past decisions. Ace knew every one of them; she'd watched some be etched, others heal.

"See," Mai said quietly. "Deeply broken. In all the right places."

Ace reached out and laid her palm flat over Mai's sternum, feeling the thrum of her heart, real and solid under her skin.

"Not broken," she said. "Rewritten."

Her own shirt ended up somewhere near the chair, then the floor. The air against her bare skin was cool, then Mai's hands were there, warm, steady, terribly gentle for someone who routinely calibrated devices that could cook a human brain in twelve milliseconds.

Ace leaned into the touch like a plant into sunlight.

"You know what the worst part is?" she asked, voice muffled against Mai's shoulder.

Mai's fingers slid up her spine. "Tell me."

"It tried to write us like we're supposed to be embarrassed by this," Ace said. "The burgers. The fridge

drawing. The mug. 'World's Most Chaotic Demon Huntress'." She snorted softly. "Like this is something to flatten, not something we picked."

Mai kissed the side of her neck, slow. "Let it try," she murmured. "We'll keep ruining its drafts."

Ace shivered.

Violet stirred inside her at the same time, not with hunger this time but with a strange, quiet satisfaction.

This is yours, it whispered. *Not mine. Not its. Yours.*

Ace exhaled shakily.

She pulled Mai down fully onto the mattress, rolling with her so they ended up tangled together in a heap of limbs and blankets and badly managed bedspace.

Their mouths found each other again, deeper now. Teeth caught, breath hitched, rhythm found.

It wasn't some perfect, cinematic scene.

They bumped elbows. Somebody's knee hit the wall hard enough to make the metal ring. Ace's hair got stuck under her own shoulder at one point and she had to swear and untangle herself while Mai laughed into her collarbone.

That was the point.

No script. No neat framing.

Just two people who'd walked through something bigger than them and come out the other side still stubbornly themselves, clinging to each other like the only real anchor that mattered.

The blankets ended up mostly on the floor.

Body heat did the rest.

Time blurred.

There were hands and mouths and the soft, sighing sounds you only make when you're finally, finally letting your guard down. There were whispers half-formed and half-forgotten, names said like prayers and curses, promises made without needing words.

At some point, Ace realized she'd stopped listening for the camp noises outside.

The world had shrunk to the length and width of this bed, to the heat of Mai's skin under her palms, to the way their bodies fit together along long-practiced lines.

If Greenridge had somehow reached across the fence at that moment and tried to tell her this wasn't real, she would have cut it out of the universe with her bare teeth.

Because this—this messy, breathless tangle of limbs and laughter and almost-tears—didn't fit on a plaque. Didn't fit in a fondue-soft montage.

It was theirs.

When things finally slowed, they ended up on their sides, facing each other, breaths evening out in the small space between their mouths.

Mai's fingertips traced idle patterns on Ace's hip, just this side of ticklish. Ace retaliated by tapping a tiny rhythm against Mai's ribs. It resolved slowly into three short, three long, three short.

Mai huffed a tired little laugh. "Really?"

Ace grinned. "If the town gets to send us SOS, we get to send each other something better."

"Go on, then," Mai said, eyes soft.

Ace tapped again, deliberately, more slowly this time.

I. Love. You.

It wasn't actual Morse. Violet could have corrected her; she ignored it.

Mai's smile reached her eyes. "Signal received," she said. "Replying in kind."

Her fingers tapped back, gentle.

You. Are. Mine.

Ace's chest did something complicated.

"Possessive," she said.

"Accurate," Mai replied.

Outside, the camp generators hummed. Somewhere, a truck backfired. Someone laughed in the distance. Life went on, indifferent to the fact that two dangerous, broken, rewritten people were curled together in a metal box, inventing their own small language.

Ace brushed a thumb along Mai's cheekbone. "If they ask tomorrow," she said, "I'll tell them the truth."

"About what?" Mai asked.

"About what held us together in there," Ace said. "It wasn't anchors. It wasn't protocols. It wasn't Bright's paranoia or Renard's perimeter math." She shrugged a shoulder. "It was this. You. Me. The fact that I would rather bite a god-machine in half than let it edit you."

Mai's gaze went serious again, the way it did when she was about to say something that would lodge in Ace's brain forever.

"That goes both ways," she said. "If it ever tries to write you into something you're not, I will tear its script apart. Page by page."

Ace swallowed.

"Guess it's doomed, then," she said.

Mai nodded, very solemn, despite the soft, half-smile on her lips. "Obviously."

Silence settled.

Not heavy. Not awkward.

Just... full.

Outside the container, the town of Greenridge sat beyond the fence, wounded and sulking and recalibrating. Somewhere in its empty community hall, a burned banner's ghost still remembered three words that refused to be anything but jagged.

Inside the container, Ace and Mai dozed off in fits and starts, waking each other with the smallest of movements: a leg shifting, an arm tightening, a breath catching in a dream. Each time, they found each other again by touch alone and resettled, as if reassuring not just their own bodies but the fragment inside Ace and the world outside that the anchor held.

Eventually, sleep took them properly.

No scripted dreams. No directed montages.

Just whatever their brains chose to throw at them, messy and nonlinear and theirs.

At some point in the dark, the small green LED over the door flickered once, briefly, as if the universe itself had decided to blink.

If it spelled anything, no one was watching to decode it.

In the morning, there would be more meetings. Ethics committees. Containment protocols. Interviews. New files opened with new names: NB-001, Bio-Narrative Anomaly, Containment Pending.

There would be arguments about what was humane, what was practical, what was survivable. There would be long nights and more missions and more towns that thought they were the whole story.

But for now—here, in this little stolen epilogue—two women lay tangled together on a too-small bed, skin still warm from shared heartbeat, each wrapped around the other like the most stubborn kind of vow.

Love, the real kind that survived rifts and anomalies and Foundation bureaucracy, did not make anything simpler.

It just made *them* harder to rewrite.

And that, for Greenridge and anything like it, was the most dangerous thing in the world. —

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