

## CHAPTER 1 — Residual Silence

The first thing Ace noticed was the absence.

Not the absence of sound—there was plenty of that. The Foundation's safe quarters hummed with vents and fluorescent ballast and the slow, disciplined footsteps of people who had learned to walk quietly even when nobody asked them to.

No. It was a different absence.

It was the missing shape of the world as she'd known it.

For years, everything had been brutal but legible: a corridor becomes a trap, a door becomes a mouth, a shadow becomes a threat. You move, you cut, you breathe through pain, you stabilize on Mai's voice like it's a rope tied around your ribs.

Now there was a third presence in the room.

Shamaterazu sat—sat—on a chair that had been built for human proportions and looked like it might snap out of embarrassment. She was too tall for the ceiling height in a way that made the architecture feel guilty. Her knees were folded like she'd apologized to them. One hand rested on her own thigh, the other hovered near the edge of the table as if she wasn't sure whether the furniture wanted to be touched.

Her eyes held stormlight. Not theatrics. Not some fantasy glow. More like the sky had decided to live behind her irises and was still negotiating the rent.

The air listened to her.

Ace could feel it, even without trying. Tiny pressure changes. The whisper of static. A barely-there lift, like the room had inhaled and was holding it.

Mai moved the way she always moved when something new entered the equation: calm, precise, refusing to let wonder become a mistake.

She was at the kitchenette, rinsing three cups even though they'd been delivered sterile-wrapped. She didn't do it because the cups needed it.

She did it because hands needed something to do.

"You don't have to," Shammy said softly.

Mai glanced over her shoulder. Her silver hair caught the light and made it colder. "I know."

Ace watched them the way she watched hallways: not for beauty, not for narrative, for vectors.

Shammy was vertical. A rising column. Unavoidable. A weather system that had been taught manners.

Mai was horizontal. The line that makes chaos solvable.

Ace was... depth. The pressure point beneath the floorboards. The part of the room that could collapse the whole building if it decided to.

A triad.

Not romantic. Not symbolic. Structural.

Still—Ace's stomach tightened, and not from fear. From the old, half-buried instinct that a third presence meant a third angle you could be attacked from.

Violet stirred.

Not a voice. Not even a thought. A shimmer at the edge of sensation, like a fingernail dragged softly over glass somewhere inside Ace's skull.

Three is unstable, something in her wanted to insist.

Mai set the cups down. "Tea?"

Ace shrugged. It was easier than words.

Shammy's lips twitched. "I don't know if I—" She paused, as if she'd heard herself hesitate and hated it. "Yes. Tea is... good. Tea is safe."

The way she said safe was strange. Not childish. Not naive. More like she'd studied the word and found it valuable.

Mai poured. Steam rose. The room changed slightly, the way air changes when something warm exists in it and everyone pretends not to notice.

Ace's gaze slid to the corner where her katanas lay in their sheathes against the wall. Emerald fracture-lines in the metal caught light even when there was none to catch. They'd been part of her for so long that their presence was almost an organ. A comfort. A threat. A promise.

Her weapons had always been honest.

Shammy looked at them, then away, like she knew better than to stare.

"You don't have to sit like that," Mai said.

Shammy blinked. "Like what?"

"Like you're about to be asked to leave."

Shammy's shoulders lifted and fell. A tiny stormfront, restrained. "I don't know the rules."

"There aren't rules," Mai said. Then, after half a second, she corrected herself. "There are... boundaries. But not rules."

Ace took her tea and didn't drink. The warmth against her palms grounded her in a way the room failed to.

Outside the door, a guard's radio crackled once. A code. A reply. The sound of the Foundation's nervous system.

Shammy's head tilted. "They are afraid."

Mai didn't deny it. "They should be."

Shammy's smile sharpened. "Of me?"

Mai's eyes flicked to Ace first. Always. Like checking the anchor point before speaking.

"Of what's changing," Mai said. "And of what they don't control."

Ace finally drank. Bitter, hot, real.

In the silence that followed, Shammy glanced at Ace. Not like a stranger. Like someone looking at an animal that might bolt or bite.

"Do you want me here?" Shammy asked.

It wasn't a manipulation. It wasn't a plea. It was... a calibration question. Weather asking the window whether it's allowed to exist.

Ace stared back. Violet shimmered again, the faintest suggestion of laughter or hunger—hard to tell which.

Ace answered the only way she could answer honestly.

She lifted her cup a fraction. A small nod.

Shammy exhaled. The room's pressure eased so subtly it felt like someone had released a clenched fist inside Ace's lungs.

Mai watched the exchange and pretended she hadn't. She always let people have their moments without invading them.

"Sleep," Mai said, after a while. "We're being moved tomorrow."

Ace's eyebrows raised.

Mai's mouth went thin. "Bright. Gears. Full briefing."

Shammy leaned forward. The chair creaked like it wanted a confession. "Briefing about what?"

Mai's answer was quiet, and it landed like a nail in soft wood.

"About the fact that two is no longer enough."

Ace didn't like the truth of it.

But she couldn't deny the way her body had stopped bracing the moment Shammy's presence settled into the room—not as a threat, but as... an atmospheric stabilizer. A column you could lean against without it becoming a cage.

Violet sulked. Or perhaps it listened.

Ace set her cup down. The sound was small.

The silence that followed wasn't empty anymore.

It was residual.

And it was waiting. —

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Last update: **27/03/2026 16:04**

