

CHAPTER 2 — Foundation Re-enters

They moved at dawn, because the Foundation liked moving things at dawn. Less traffic. Fewer eyes. More control.

Ace rode in the back of an unmarked van with no windows and no attempt at comfort. Mai sat beside her, shoulder close enough to be a steady line in peripheral vision. Shammy took the opposite bench, hunched slightly so she wouldn't scrape the ceiling. It looked absurd—a storm forced into a box.

The driver said nothing.

The escort vehicle ahead signaled with lights, not sirens. The Foundation didn't want to announce itself. It preferred to exist like a rumor.

When the van stopped, the door opened into a corridor of clean concrete and colder air. The smell was sterile, but not hospital-sterile. More like new building sterile. Like the place hadn't yet learned what kind of nightmares it would house.

A man in a gray suit held a clipboard and spoke without looking up. "Ace. Mai. Shamaterazu—"

Shammy blinked. "That is my name."

He froze for half a second, then continued. "Follow the yellow line. No deviation. Cameras are active. If you need anything, ask the escort."

Mai's lips twitched. "If we need anything, I suspect we'll take it."

The man didn't smile. "That's why we have cameras."

Ace walked. Her steps were quiet. The yellow line felt like an insult—like a child's guide in a museum—yet she followed it anyway. Not because she respected it. Because she respected Mai's ability to choose battles.

The corridor opened into a larger space: a debrief room, half office, half interrogation suite. Table. Chairs. Wall display. Two guards who tried very hard not to look like guards.

And at the far end, leaning with careless posture against the edge of the table as if he'd been born in a place like this and never stopped being amused by it, was Jack Bright.

He looked tired in the way people look tired when they've survived too long.

He didn't stand up when they entered. He simply lifted a hand.

"Morning," Bright said. "Or whatever passes for morning when you live inside the world's most expensive bunker."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "You look like you've been up all night."

Bright's smile flickered. "I have. The Foundation is allergic to sleeping when there's a new variable in the room."

His gaze slid to Shammy, held for a beat too long, then moved away with a professionalism that looked practiced.

“And you,” Bright added. “Are taller in person.”

Shammy’s brows rose. “Is that... an evaluation?”

Bright shrugged. “It’s an observation. We have specialists for evaluations.”

A door at the side opened.

Dr. Gears entered without ceremony, like a thought becoming a person. He carried a tablet. His eyes scanned, recorded, calculated. He didn’t waste expression where it wasn’t necessary.

“Thank you for arriving,” Gears said. His voice had the flatness of someone who’d decided long ago that drama was a kind of contamination.

Mai gave him a single nod, respectful but not submissive.

Ace stayed silent.

Shammy... offered a faint smile that didn’t reach her stormlit eyes.

Bright gestured to the chairs. “Sit. Please. Or don’t. But the cameras will cry if you hover.”

They sat.

Gears placed the tablet down. On the wall display behind him, a map flickered into existence—no labels, just geometry and lines like a brain’s wiring diagram.

“You have been operating as a binary system,” Gears said, eyes on Mai and Ace as if Shammy were a new sensor reading rather than a person. “It has been... effective. It is no longer sufficient.”

Bright leaned forward slightly. “Translation: you’ve been winning knife fights in hallways. Now you’re standing next to a fire.”

Mai’s jaw tightened. “We didn’t ask for—”

Bright cut her off gently. “You didn’t ask for most of what’s happened to you. That’s not the point.”

Gears tapped the tablet. The diagram shifted. A third line appeared, intersecting the other two.

“First Contact occurred,” Gears said. “Subsequent proximity has produced measurable stabilization across multiple parameters.”

Shammy’s eyes flicked to the diagram. “You measured us.”

Bright spread his hands. “We measure everything. It’s our love language.”

Ace’s fingers tightened, just once, on her own knee. The room’s air pressure twitched in response—Shammy noticed before anyone else and breathed it down into calm.

Mai noticed too. Her hand brushed Ace’s forearm under the table—nothing romantic, nothing showy. Just an anchor.

Gears continued. “We are not here to recruit you.”

Bright snorted. “We don’t get to recruit people like you. We get to survive near you.”

Gears's gaze finally settled on Shammy in a way that was less clinical than before. "We need to understand the fault."

Mai's eyes sharpened. "Fault."

Gears nodded. "A structural weakness in the layered reality you have been encountering. Your prior survival strategies—your... improvisational containment—have delayed progression. They have not stopped it."

Bright's smile died, just for a second.

"Something is building," Bright said, quieter now. "And it's not polite enough to wait for us to finish our paperwork."

Ace felt Violet shiver again, pleased or irritated—still impossible to tell.

Mai leaned in. "So what is this meeting?"

Gears's answer was precise.

"A decision point."

Bright's answer was messier, human.

"A warning," he said. "And a plan that makes you hate me slightly less later."

Mai's stare didn't soften. "Try."

Bright exhaled and glanced at Gears.

Gears nodded once, the smallest permission.

Bright tapped the table with two fingers and said the word like it was a bitter joke.

"Detroit."

Mai didn't move. Ace didn't blink.

Shammy frowned. "Why Detroit?"

Bright's eyes held theirs.

"Because," he said, "sometimes the only way to bleed pressure out of a system is to let it run." —

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