

## CHAPTER 5 — Blacklist as a Pressure Valve

The Foundation loved briefings, so they briefed.

They briefed in diagrams, in jargon, in half-truths that sounded like full truths until you leaned on them hard enough to feel the hollow parts.

But Bright, for all his sarcasm and his survivalist charm, knew when to strip away the noise.

He stood up and paced once, like motion helped him think. “Here’s the reality,” he said. “The Blacklist chain doesn’t behave like a normal criminal circuit. It doesn’t behave like a cult. It doesn’t behave like a memetic event. It behaves like a... mechanism.”

Mai’s eyes stayed on him, unblinking. “Mechanism implies design.”

Bright shrugged. “Or emergence. Either way, it runs.”

Gears added, “The recruitment patterns suggest inevitability. The participants describe compulsion, but not in the traditional memetic sense.”

Ace’s gaze narrowed. “So it calls.”

Shammy’s voice went quiet. “Like a storm line calls the air around it.”

Bright pointed at her. “Yes. Exactly. Thank you.”

Mai tapped the folder. “And your plan is to insert us into that mechanism.”

“Not insert,” Bright corrected. “Align. You’re already in the gravity well. We’re just making sure you don’t hit the ground head-first.”

Mai’s lips tightened. “You keep speaking like we’re not in control.”

Bright’s expression changed—honest now. “Because sometimes you won’t be.”

That landed heavier than any threat.

Gears spoke again, calm as a scalpel. “The objective is not victory.”

Mai’s brows lifted. “Then what is it?”

Gears’s answer was precise. “Stability. Data acquisition. Containment of collateral. Survival.”

Ace’s voice came low. “And if it demands victory.”

Bright’s smile returned, but it was not kind. “Then you do what you always do.”

Mai glanced at Ace. “We win.”

Ace didn’t confirm. She didn’t have to.

Shammy’s fingers traced the edge of her cup. The air around them fluttered with barely-contained energy. “A race,” she murmured. “A city. A mechanism that bleeds pressure. And people die.”

Bright’s voice softened a fraction. “Yes.”

Shammy looked at him, and her stormlight eyes held something sharp. "You are comfortable with that."

Bright's smile vanished. "No," he said simply. "I'm used to it. There's a difference."

Mai exhaled through her nose. "So what do you need from us."

Bright's answer was simple. "Consent."

The word hung in the room, heavy and clean.

Not romantic consent.

Operational.

Human.

Mai's eyes flicked to Ace. The old pattern. Always check the anchor.

Ace's gaze moved to Shammy, the new pattern.

Shammy watched them both, waiting.

Ace nodded once.

Mai's jaw set. "We do it."

Bright's shoulders eased, just slightly. "Good."

Gears tapped his tablet. "Then we proceed to logistics."

Mai raised a hand. "One thing."

Gears paused. "Yes."

Mai's eyes sharpened. "We are not entering Detroit blind. No 'and then they had cars' nonsense."

Bright's mouth twitched. "Agreed."

Gears's voice remained flat, but there was something like respect in it. "A vehicle briefing has been prepared."

Ace's gaze flicked up. "Vehicle."

Bright nodded. "Yeah. The fun part."

Shammy's expression shifted—curiosity and wariness mixed like thunderclouds.

Mai leaned back. "Fine. Show us."

Bright gestured toward the door. "Then let's go meet the machines that are going to keep you alive long enough to hate me later."

INTERLUDE — Vehicle Briefing

The garage wasn't cinematic.

It wasn't a neon-lit underground lair with dramatic shadows and ritual circles on the floor.

It was concrete and steel and hydraulic lifts. It smelled like oil and cold metal and the faint chemical bite of fresh sealant. The lights were bright in the way bright lights are always a little aggressive—like they're trying to prevent secrets from forming.

And yet, the Foundation had still managed to make it feel like a confession booth.

Two vehicles waited behind a thick security gate that rolled up with a low mechanical groan.

Ace saw hers first.

A Nissan Nismo 270R.

Compact. Sharp. Old enough to feel honest. Built like a decision someone made with a grim smile and an understanding of what speed costs.

Ace didn't say anything, but her posture changed. The slightest shift of weight. A predator recognizing terrain.

Mai saw hers.

An Aston Martin DB11.

Sleek, heavy in a controlled way. A blade disguised as a luxury object. The kind of car that could glide through a city as if the city owed it respect.

Mai's expression didn't change, but her eyes narrowed as she took in the lines, the stance, the implications.

Shammy stood between them and looked... strangely cautious. The air around her tightened as if it didn't trust the machines to behave.

Bright walked along the cars like a man showing off a kennel full of wolves he didn't fully own.

"Before you ask," he said, "no. They didn't fall from the sky. We didn't pull them out of a portal. Nobody made a deal with a demon in a leather jacket to get you keys."

Mai's voice was dry. "Disappointing."

Bright pointed at her. "That tone? That tone is why I'm still alive."

Gears approached the Nismo first, eyes clinical. "The 270R is mechanically readable. Low dependency on fragile modern systems. High serviceability."

Ace's gaze traced the car's body. "It's light."

"Yes," Gears said. "And predictable."

Bright added, "And when you hit something, it won't immediately become a computer error message."

Mai stepped closer to the DB11. "And this."

Gears didn't romanticize it. "Stability. Wheelbase. Weight distribution. Predictable behavior at speed. Interior volume sufficient for two operators without compromising control."

Shammy's brows rose. "Two."

Mai's eyes slid to her. "You."

Shammy's mouth opened, then closed. A storm trying to decide whether to smile.

Bright leaned on the DB11's hood with the casual disrespect of someone who trusted the metal to hold him. "Before anyone gets any ideas," he said, "nothing about these cars is anomalous. If you want magic, go join a circus."

Mai's eyes stayed on him. "Then what are we looking at."

Bright straightened, and his tone became the tone he used when he didn't want to joke because joking would make the truth unbearable.

"Damage control," he said.

Gears tapped a panel on the wall. A screen lit up with a checklist, not flashy—just practical.

"Instrumentation package," Gears said. "Telemetry. Encrypted comms. Data logging. Fire suppression. Roll cage. Harness systems."

Mai's eyes scanned. "Transponder."

"Yes," Gears said. "Identification. Tracking. Not negotiation."

Ace's gaze flicked to the list. "Reinforced tires."

"Run-flat," Bright said. "Not indestructible. Just... not pathetic."

Mai's mouth twitched. "You're adorable when you pretend you're not terrified."

Bright smiled thinly. "I'm not pretending."

Shammy stepped closer to the DB11 and reached out—not touching yet, just hovering a hand a few centimeters from the paint.

The air around her sparked faintly, a whisper of static that the garage lights caught and then lost.

Gears watched her hand, not her face. "Grounding pathways," he said. "Static discharge management. Environmental stabilization."

Shammy blinked. "For me."

Gears corrected. "For the air around you."

Bright nodded. "Exactly. This doesn't 'control' you. It prevents you from accidentally turning a closed space into a thunderstorm because you got annoyed."

Shammy's expression tightened. Not anger—something like wounded pride.

Mai's voice cut cleanly. "She's not a problem to be controlled."

Bright lifted both hands. "Agreed. She's a variable to be respected. There's a difference."

Ace's gaze moved from the Nismo to Shammy.

She could feel Violet again, faintly, like a cat watching a bird through glass.

Machines. Control. Ownership.

Ace didn't like any of those words.

But she did like honesty.

And these cars felt honest. Not upgrades. Not trophies. Tools.

Mai stepped closer to Bright. "We don't get faster."

Bright's eyes met hers. "No."

Mai's eyes sharpened. "We get harder to erase."

Bright's mouth twitched. "Now you're learning the Foundation dialect."

Gears tapped the screen again. A final line appeared.

Extraction Protocol: improved. Not guaranteed.

Mai read it out loud, flat. "Not guaranteed."

Gears nodded. "It cannot be."

Shammy's fingers finally touched the DB11's hood. Very lightly. Like she was testing whether the metal would flinch.

It didn't.

The air relaxed a fraction.

Ace stepped closer to the Nismo and rested her palm on the roof.

The car was cold.

Real.

"It's acceptable," Ace said quietly.

Bright exhaled as if he'd been holding his breath for the last ten minutes. "Good. Because I'd really hate to have to argue with you about car aesthetics."

Mai glanced at Shammy. "Comfortable?"

Shammy's smile returned, small and strange. "I have never been in a car that looks like it knows secrets."

Mai's mouth curved. "Welcome to the club."

Bright gestured toward the far end of the garage where a loading bay waited, doors closed like clenched teeth. "We move tonight," he said. "No drama. No parade. You will leave like a rumor."

Ace's violet eyes narrowed. "And Detroit?"

Bright's smile returned, too sharp.

"Detroit," he said, "will try to eat you."

Mai's voice didn't shake. "Then it'll choke." —

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