

## Chapter 1

Detroit was doing that thing cities do when they've finally spent themselves—quiet not because they're safe, but because they're tired.

The safehouse sat high enough that the streets below were reduced to lines and pulses: a few moving headlights, the occasional smear of brake-lights, the dull-blue blink of something official that hadn't learned to let go. Rain had come and gone in the night, leaving the windows filmed in a thin, imperfect skin of water. The glass held the city like a bad memory—present, but softened around the edges.

Mai woke before the light fully committed.

Not with a start. Not with the stupid spike of panic her body used to do after long runs. She slid into consciousness the way you slide a blade back into a sheath: controlled, careful, already counting.

Breath—steady. Pulse—normal. Anchor field—quiet, humming at a low, stable frequency like an engine idling.

Her first thought wasn't danger. Her first thought was: Where's the storm?

She didn't have to lift her head to feel Shammy in the room. Shammy was never just in a room. She was pressure and temperature and that faint, sweet ozone note that clung to fabric and skin and made electronics behave like they had opinions.

The safehouse air had been warm when they'd finally stumbled in hours ago—warm in the most human way possible, bodies on a bed, heat pooled in sheets, the kind of warmth you don't earn in combat. But now the warmth had shifted. There was an open-space feeling to the air, a carefulness, like someone had peeled a blanket off a sleeping animal so it wouldn't overheat.

Mai opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling without really seeing it.

Ace was still asleep.

She lay curled on her side, small body folded in on itself with that predatory efficiency that made even rest look like readiness. Her black hair had fallen across her face in uneven strands, violet sheen catching the barely-there dawn. One hand—tiny, calloused, scar-lined—was still fisted in the sheet like she'd refused to let the night go completely.

Mai watched her for a moment longer than she'd admit in a report.

The last day had put too many things into Mai's hands. Plans. Runs. Decisions. The math of survival. The raw, quiet center of Ace's being—Violet's pressure always there, always waiting.

And then last night had happened, like a door that had been locked for so long it had become part of the wall, and then suddenly wasn't.

It had started in fragments, the way these things often did after a run: gear stripped off in the dim light of the safehouse, bodies aching from exertion, the air thick with unspoken tension. Mai had felt it building for weeks—the pull toward Shammy, that storm-wild energy that hummed against her anchor field like electricity seeking ground. Ace had noticed it too, her violet eyes sharp and knowing, never jealous, only assessing.

They'd collapsed onto the bed together, the three of them, sweat-slick and weary. Shammy had hesitated at the edge, her aura flickering like distant lightning, but Ace had reached out first, her small hand curling around Shammy's wrist with unyielding certainty. "Stay," Ace had murmured, voice low and rough from the night's chaos.

Shammy had frozen, then yielded, her tall frame unfolding onto the mattress beside them. The air had shifted then, ozone sharpening as Shammy's control slipped just enough to let the heat rise.

Mai remembered the first touch: her fingers tracing the line of Shammy's jaw, feeling the subtle tremor there, the way Shammy's breath caught like thunder trapped in her chest. Ace had leaned in from the other side, her lips brushing Shammy's shoulder, soft and deliberate, a silent invitation that pulled them all closer.

It wasn't hurried. It never was with them. Consent woven into every breath, every glance—Ace's hand sliding under Shammy's shirt, palm flat against the curve of her breast, thumb circling the hardening nipple with slow precision. Shammy had gasped, her aura flaring, sending a warm pulse through the room that made Mai's skin tingle.

Mai had kissed Shammy then, deep and claiming, tasting the storm on her tongue—salty sweat and something electric. Her hands had mapped Shammy's body, slipping down to the waistband of her pants, fingers deft as they unfastened and delved lower, finding the wet heat between her thighs. Shammy had arched, a low moan escaping as Mai's fingers circled her clit, slow and teasing, building the pressure like a gathering front.

Ace had watched for a moment, her violet eyes darkening with desire, before she shifted, straddling Shammy's thigh. She ground down gently, her own arousal slick against Shammy's skin, while her mouth found Shammy's breast, tongue flicking over the sensitive peak. Shammy's hand tangled in Ace's hair, holding her close, as her other hand sought Mai, fingers slipping between Mai's legs in return, mirroring the rhythm until they were all moving together, breaths syncing in a shared cadence.

The release had come in waves—Shammy first, her body tensing like a storm breaking, aura pulsing as she cried out, clenching around Mai's fingers. Ace followed, grinding harder, her small frame shuddering with quiet intensity. Mai held on longest, anchor field steadying them all, until the combined touch—Shammy's fingers deep inside her, Ace's mouth on her neck—pushed her over the edge, pleasure uncoiling in a controlled flood.

Afterward, they'd lain tangled, bodies cooling in the shared warmth, no words needed. It wasn't just sex. It was a decompression chamber built out of skin and breath and consent so precise it might as well have been ritual—a binding that reshaped their orbit.

Mai exhaled slowly now, in the morning light, keeping her anchor field low so she didn't wake Ace. She sat up, shoulders rolling once, and listened.

From the kitchenette: a soft clink. A drawer opening, then closing with deliberate control. A quiet, breathy curse—Shammy's voice, pitched low like she was trying not to disturb the world.

Mai swung her legs off the bed, bare feet touching the cool floor. The safehouse had that borrowed feel: expensive in ways that were meant to disappear, furniture chosen for durability, not personality. The kind of place that was built to be vacated.

She padded across the room, moving around the scattered remains of gear—boots, holsters, a jacket thrown over a chair like it had been insulted and abandoned. The kitchenette was small. Shammy had

to fold herself into it the way a tall person folds into a cramped car: knees bent, shoulders angled, every movement adapted.

She stood with her back half-turned, rummaging through a cabinet. Her hair was a mess of storm-gradient strands, silver at the roots deepening into faint electric tones at the ends. In the dim morning light, it looked like the sky caught in a human shape.

Mai leaned against the counter and watched her without speaking.

Shammy was wearing a tank top that looked like it belonged to a man twice Mai's size. The hem fell wrong on her hips. It made her look less like an entity and more like... someone who'd slept badly and gotten dressed in the dark, her full breasts straining slightly against the fabric, nipples faintly visible in the cool air.

Her shoulders were tense.

Not "I'm about to break your spine" tense. Not "fragment on the perimeter" tense. Something quieter. Something that felt—annoyingly—like shame.

Shammy found what she was looking for and held it up with an expression that was almost triumphant: a dented can of coffee. "Found it," she whispered, as if the can might hear her and flee. "Smells like despair beans, but it's technically caffeine."

Mai's mouth twitched. "Perfect. We've had worse."

Shammy's grin flashed quick and bright, then faded just as fast. She set the can down, reached for the coffeemaker, and hesitated.

The hesitation wasn't about the machine.

It was about Mai being there.

Mai didn't fill the silence. She let it sit between them like a small, honest thing. The kind of silence you only allow when you trust someone not to weaponize it.

Shammy cleared her throat. "Ace still out?"

"Asleep," Mai said. "Properly asleep."

Shammy nodded, eyes flicking to the bed area instinctively, like she could see through walls if she concentrated. She couldn't—not like that—but she could read shifts in pressure and breath like a language.

"Good," Shammy murmured. "She needs it."

Mai watched Shammy's hands. The way she held the coffee can a fraction too carefully. The way she was keeping her elbows in, making herself smaller in a space that already didn't fit her. The way her aura—usually a living thing—was tightened down, strangled into something polite.

Shammy opened the lid on the coffee can, sniffed it like she didn't trust it, then started spooning grounds into the filter with exaggerated caution.

Mai didn't move.

Shammy didn't look at her.

It went on for another ten seconds—long enough for Mai's brain to finish its quiet, relentless analysis.

This wasn't tactical.

This wasn't "keeping a low profile."

This was Shammy doing what Shammy always did when she wasn't sure she had the right to exist at full volume: she minimized.

Mai pushed off the counter. "Shammy."

Shammy flinched. It was subtle—just a micro-shift in shoulders and aura, like a storm cell jolting at a sudden temperature change. "Yeah?"

"Stop doing that."

Shammy blinked, spoon suspended mid-air. "Doing what?"

Mai stepped closer and took the spoon from Shammy's hand gently, like disarming a friend instead of a threat. She set it down on the counter. "That."

Shammy frowned, confusion and defensiveness wrestling in her expression. "I'm making coffee."

Mai's gaze stayed on her. "You're shrinking."

Shammy's jaw tightened. "I'm not—"

Mai lifted a hand, palm up. Not a demand. An invitation. "You are."

Shammy opened her mouth, closed it, then let out a breath that made the air in the kitchenette shift like a window being cracked open. "I'm... trying not to rattle things."

Mai's eyes flicked to the cabinet door Shammy had closed with unnecessary care. "Nothing here is fragile."

Shammy's eyes flashed. "You are."

Mai didn't react like she'd been slapped, but something in her chest tightened anyway. Not pain—recognition.

Shammy stared at her like she'd said too much. Like she'd just fired a round she hadn't meant to chamber.

"I didn't mean—" Shammy started.

Mai stepped even closer, until the narrow space of the kitchenette forced Shammy to either back up or hold her ground.

Shammy held.

That alone was progress.

Mai kept her voice low. "I know what you meant."

Shammy swallowed, throat working. The stormlight behind her eyes dimmed to something softer, uncertain. “Do you?” she asked, and the question wasn’t challenge—it was fear dressed up in words.

Mai didn’t answer immediately. She reached past Shammy and pressed the button on the coffeemaker. It beeped quietly, the small electronic sound absurdly normal.

Then Mai turned back and looked up at Shammy. “You’re treating yourself like a hazard,” she said.

Shammy’s mouth twisted into a humorless smile. “I am a hazard.”

Mai’s tone didn’t soften. “We’re all hazards.”

Shammy’s eyes flickered. “That’s different.”

Mai tilted her head. “Explain.”

Shammy hesitated, and Mai saw the exact moment her instinct tried to retreat. She didn’t retreat physically—she stayed in place—but her aura tightened again, pressure pulling inward like she was trying to fold her own sky into a smaller box.

Mai reached out and placed two fingers lightly on Shammy’s wrist.

Not a restraint. Not a claim.

A grounding point.

Shammy went still.

Mai held her gaze. “Talk.”

Shammy exhaled slowly. “You and Ace—” She stopped, searching for a safe angle. “You two are... the orbit. You’re the stable system. You’ve been doing this for a long time. You know how to hold each other.”

Mai didn’t interrupt.

Shammy’s voice dropped. “And I’m weather.”

Mai felt the words land like a weight.

Shammy continued, eyes fixed on Mai’s fingers where they touched her wrist, as if looking directly at Mai would make it too real. “Weather passes through. Weather changes the room. Weather... breaks glass if it hits wrong. So I—” She swallowed. “So I keep it contained.”

Mai let that sit for a heartbeat.

Then she said, very quietly, “You think you’re protecting us.”

Shammy’s laugh was small and sharp. “Aren’t I?”

Mai’s hand slid from Shammy’s wrist to her forearm, the touch firming. “You are protecting us,” she said. “But you’re doing it by pretending you’re not allowed to take up space.”

Shammy’s eyes lifted finally, storm-blue caught on Mai’s face. “You don’t understand what it’s like,”

she said, and there was no anger, only truth. “When I stop... holding it in, it doesn’t just affect me. It affects everything. Walls. Windows. Electronics. People. I can feel their bodies trying to adjust.”

Mai’s voice stayed even. “And you’ve decided that means you should be smaller.”

Shammy’s gaze sharpened. “Would you rather I be bigger?”

Mai’s mouth twitched, not amused—focused. “Yes.”

Shammy froze like Mai had spoken a containment phrase that rewrote physics.

Mai didn’t give her time to spiral into denial. “Not uncontrolled,” she added. “Not careless. But present. Here. With us.”

Shammy’s throat worked again. “Mai,” she said, and her voice cracked just slightly around the name. “Last night was—”

Mai’s fingers tightened on Shammy’s arm, not hard, but with unmistakable intent. “Last night wasn’t an accident,” she said. “And it wasn’t a charity project.”

Shammy’s eyes widened. “I didn’t think it was—”

“You did,” Mai cut in, and there was no cruelty in it. Just clean precision. “Not consciously. But your instincts are still trying to file it under ‘temporary anomaly: permitted.’”

Shammy’s shoulders shifted, the tension returning. “Because it might have to be,” she whispered.

There it was.

Mai felt the sentence like a knife sliding under the ribs. Not because it was melodramatic. Because it was the kind of quiet fear that people carried when they had spent too long alone with their own intensity.

Mai breathed in slowly and let her anchor field rise a fraction—not enough to wake Ace, but enough to steady the air. The kitchenette seemed to sharpen into focus, like the world had been tuned.

“Shammy,” Mai said, softer now, “look at me.”

Shammy did.

Mai’s voice lowered. “Do you know what I woke up thinking?”

Shammy’s brows lifted. “Coffee?”

Mai huffed a small laugh despite herself. “After that.”

Shammy waited, uncertain.

Mai held her gaze. “I woke up and checked systems,” she admitted. “Habit. Threat index. Field stability. Everything.”

Shammy’s mouth twitched. “That sounds like you.”

Mai nodded. “And then my first thought was: where’s the storm.”

Shammy blinked.

Mai continued, careful and direct. "Not because I needed you to protect me. Not because I was afraid without you. Because I noticed the space you weren't taking."

Shammy's breath caught, just slightly. "That's... stupid."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Don't insult my assessments."

Shammy's lips parted, then she shut them again. She looked, for a moment, like someone caught in the act of wanting.

Mai's hand slid down Shammy's arm to her hand—big, warm, calloused in strange places, fingers that could have snapped steel if she ever stopped pretending she was gentle. Mai laced their fingers together with deliberate calm.

Shammy's aura shivered.

Not a surge. Not a storm front.

A tremor. Like thunder purring instead of growling.

Mai watched it happen and didn't flinch.

Shammy stared at their joined hands like it was a tether thrown into open sky.

"You don't have to be smaller," Mai said, voice quiet but absolute. "You just have to be with us."

Shammy swallowed. "And if I mess it up?"

Mai's mouth curved—thin, sharp, honest. "Then we adjust."

Shammy's eyes flicked up. "That easy?"

Mai's shoulders lifted in a small shrug. "No," she said. "But simple. There's a difference."

The coffeemaker gurgled, the sound oddly intimate in the narrow space.

Shammy's lips twitched. "You're scaring me."

Mai's gaze stayed steady. "Good."

Shammy let out a breath that almost sounded like a laugh, but didn't fully commit. "Why are you like this?"

Mai tilted her head again. "Like what?"

Shammy's eyes flicked to Mai's face, then away. "Like you can just... decide. Like you can look at the edge of something and not back away."

Mai's expression softened by a fraction. "I back away," she said. "I just do it later than most people."

Shammy's shoulders loosened slightly. The air in the kitchenette eased, pressure redistributing in a way that made the space feel less cramped.

Mai tightened her grip on Shammy's hand once, a wordless check.

Shammy's fingers squeezed back, careful and reverent, like she was afraid to crush the moment.

Mai stepped closer, until she was close enough to feel the heat of Shammy's body, close enough that her anchor field brushed Shammy's aura and found a rhythm. The contact sent a subtle spark through Mai, a reminder of the night before—the way Shammy's thighs had parted under her touch, slick and inviting.

Shammy's breath hitched again. "Mai," she whispered, and the name carried a question she wasn't daring to fully ask.

Mai lifted her free hand and touched Shammy's chest lightly, right over the sternum, where the storm inside her had decided to pretend it was human. Her fingers brushed the swell of Shammy's breast through the thin tank top, feeling the nipple harden in response.

"Stop making yourself an exit plan," Mai said.

Shammy's eyes flashed, startled. "I'm not—"

"You are," Mai repeated, and this time there was a gentleness in it. "You keep one foot outside the room so you can leave without hurting us."

Shammy's jaw tightened. "If I leave, it hurts me," she admitted, voice rough.

Mai's fingers pressed slightly into the fabric, grounding, her thumb circling slowly, eliciting a soft gasp from Shammy. "Then don't."

Shammy stared at her, stormlight brightening in her eyes like dawn hitting water. "You can't just—"

Mai cut her off with a small, deliberate step forward, closing the last inch of distance.

And then she kissed her.

Not the way she kissed Ace.

With Ace, Mai's kisses were precision and relief and shared language—a blade meeting a blade, sparks making sense.

With Shammy, Mai kissed like she was approaching a front line.

Slow. Testing. Respectful of force. Her tongue traced Shammy's lips, parting them gently, deepening the kiss as Shammy responded, her body pressing forward.

Shammy froze for half a heartbeat, shock rippling through her aura like static. Then her body softened, a long exhale leaving her, and she leaned down into the kiss like she'd been waiting for permission her entire life. Her free hand slid to Mai's waist, pulling her closer, fingers dipping under the hem of Mai's shirt to trace the curve of her hip.

Mai felt the storm respond—not violently, not destructively. Just a quiet expansion, pressure adjusting around them as if the room itself was making space for this new truth. Heat built between them, Mai's hand sliding lower, cupping Shammy's ass through her pants, squeezing firmly as their bodies aligned.

Mai broke the kiss gently and kept her forehead close to Shammy's, breath mingling, her hand still exploring, feeling the warmth radiating from Shammy's core.

Shammy's voice came out barely above a whisper. "You're sure?"

Mai didn't smile. She didn't tease.

She answered like a ritualist confirming a line of intent. "Yes." Her fingers slipped between Shammy's legs from behind, pressing against the seam of her pants, feeling the dampness there.

Shammy's eyes fluttered shut for a second, and Mai could almost see the internal argument tearing at her—instinct screaming don't take more than you're allowed, need whispering please. A soft moan escaped her as Mai rubbed gently, the friction building.

Mai's thumb brushed Shammy's knuckles where their hands were still laced. "You're not outside the orbit," she said again, softer now. "You're part of the structure."

Shammy's throat tightened, a sound slipping out that was half laugh, half broken breath. "That's insane."

Mai's mouth finally curved in something almost warm. "We've been living in insane for a while." She increased the pressure, her fingers moving in slow circles, drawing another gasp from Shammy.

The coffeemaker clicked, finished. The smell of burnt coffee filled the kitchenette like a cheap offering.

Mai didn't move away.

Neither did Shammy.

For a long moment, they stood there, hands joined, the air steady, the storm not caged but... held. Shammy's hips shifted subtly against Mai's touch, seeking more, but Mai pulled back just enough to tease, her eyes locking with Shammy's.

Then, from behind them, a soft sound.

A floorboard. A shift of weight.

Mai turned her head slightly, her hand stilling but not retreating.

Ace stood in the doorway to the main room, hair a wreck, eyes half-lidded with sleep but already sharp in the way they always were. She didn't look alarmed. She didn't look surprised.

She looked like someone who had stepped into a room and immediately understood the geometry. Her gaze lingered on Mai's hand between Shammy's legs, a faint smile curving her lips.

Her violet gaze flicked from Mai's face to Shammy's, then to their joined hands.

Ace didn't speak.

She just walked forward—barefoot, silent, compact as a pressure point—and stopped close enough that Shammy instinctively drew her aura in for a second, then stopped herself, remembering.

Ace tilted her head up at Shammy, expression unreadable but steady. Her hand reached out, brushing

Shammy's thigh, fingers trailing upward to join Mai's, pressing against the growing wetness.

A simple addition: Mai's touch, Shammy's response, Ace's reinforcement.

Shammy's breath caught like she'd been hit, her body trembling slightly as Ace's fingers slipped inside the waistband, finding her clit with unerring accuracy.

Ace's voice came out low and sleep-rough, but calm. "Coffee?"

Mai snorted, the sound almost disbelieving, even as her free hand moved to Ace's back, pulling her into the embrace. "It's going to be terrible."

Ace's mouth twitched—barely a smile, but real—as her fingers circled slowly. "Okay."

Shammy's eyes shone too bright for the dim morning. "You're not... mad?" she asked, voice hitching as the dual touch sent sparks through her.

Ace blinked once, slowly. "Why would I be mad?" Her other hand slid under Mai's shirt, cupping her breast, thumb teasing the nipple.

Shammy's lips parted, then closed again.

Mai answered instead, voice quiet but firm, her own arousal building as Ace's touch mirrored the night before. "Because she still thinks she's something we have to manage," she said, not accusing, just stating.

Ace looked at Shammy, gaze steady, fingers never pausing.

Then she said, simply, "Don't do that."

Shammy swallowed. "Do what?"

Ace's hand tightened, surprisingly strong for its size, pressing deeper. "Don't put yourself outside."

Shammy's throat worked, a tremor running through her aura—this time not fear, but something like relief trying to find a safe place to land, her hips bucking slightly against their combined hands.

Mai watched Ace's face and saw the quiet certainty there. No jealousy. No possessive spike. Just acceptance, like Ace had always known the shape of this and had been waiting for the rest of reality to catch up. Mai leaned in, kissing Ace briefly, tasting the shared desire.

Ace's eyes flicked to Mai. "You started?"

Mai's mouth curved. "Yes." Her fingers joined Ace's inside Shammy's pants, sliding into her wetness, curling gently.

Ace nodded once. "Good."

Shammy let out a sound that might have been a laugh if it hadn't been so close to tears—or ecstasy. "You two are terrifying."

Mai raised a brow. "We know."

Ace's gaze stayed on Shammy. "Drink coffee. Then we plan." But her hand didn't stop, building the

rhythm until Shammy's legs trembled, her release cresting in a quiet storm, body arching against them.

Shammy's shoulders loosened, the storm inside her settling into something that didn't feel like containment. More like... belonging.

Mai squeezed Shammy's hand once and released it only long enough to pour three mugs of the awful coffee, her own body humming with unresolved tension. The mugs didn't match. The coffee smelled like defeat.

It didn't matter.

They stood in the kitchenette—too close, too warm, too real—three people who had survived too much and were, for once, not bracing for the next hit, but savoring the current one.

Outside, Detroit continued to exist, indifferent.

Inside, the field held. —

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