



Chapter 10: Clean Map

The Foundation didn't do airports unless they had to.

Too many cameras. Too many public chokepoints. Too many "routine checks" that turned into headlines if the wrong person's badge scanner hiccupped.

So the van didn't head for Narita or Haneda. It headed for something far less glamorous: a logistics yard that pretended to store municipal maintenance equipment. No signs. No fences that looked expensive. Just a place you'd drive past a hundred times without seeing.

The moment the van rolled under the yard's corrugated roof, the city's sound dimmed—rain on metal, distant traffic, a dog barking somewhere far enough to feel normal. The vehicle stopped between two trucks that looked like they hauled electrical transformers.

And then the floor beneath them lowered.

Mai felt it before she saw it—her body had the habit of noticing any motion that wasn't expected. Her hand tightened on the disruptor.

“Of course,” she muttered. “Secret elevator. Because stairs are for civilians.”

Ace stared at the seam where the concrete slid apart. Clean. Precise. Too clean for a municipal yard.

The smell changed as they descended: oil and rain replaced by filtered air and cold metal. That sterile Foundation scent that said you are in someone else’s rules now.

Bright’s voice came through again, clearer, like the building itself wanted his authority to be audible.

“You’ll be in a shielded corridor in thirty seconds,” he said. “No windows. No external signal. No pipes connected to city infrastructure. That’s the point. Clean map.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “You say that like you’re apologizing.”

“I’m saying it like I’ve seen what cities do when they’re infected,” Bright replied. No humor. Just fact.

The elevator stopped. Doors opened on a corridor painted a shade of gray that felt designed to erase moods.

Two security staff waited—no weapons raised this time. Just scanning gear, handheld emitters, and faces that tried not to show they were looking at Ace like she was a storm cell on radar.

Mai stepped out first again. Habit. Guard. Spite. “We’re not contagious,” she snapped at the nearest scanner operator before they could even lift the device.

The operator flinched and tried to smile. “Routine.”

Mai smiled back without warmth. “So is dental surgery.”

Ace followed, quiet, gaze steady.

The scanner wand passed over her chest and paused for half a second too long. The device made a faint chirp—barely audible, but Ace heard it.

The operator’s eyes flicked up, quick and nervous.

Mai saw it.

Mai’s voice went dangerously calm. “What did it read.”

The operator swallowed. “Residual harmonic—low amplitude. No active breach. No external link detected.”

Mai didn’t relax. “Say it in normal human language.”

The operator hesitated, then: “Something...touched her. Not enough to grab. Enough to leave a fingerprint.”

Ace’s jaw tightened. That wording was too close to how she’d described it. That meant the machines agreed with her body. That meant it was real.

Bright’s voice slid in, clipped. “Keep moving.”

They did.

Down the corridor, through a double door that sealed with a soft pressure hiss. Into a smaller space that felt like the medical bay's quieter cousin: padded chair, plain table, wall-mounted sensors, a water dispenser nobody trusted.

A single camera lens in the corner watched without blinking.

Mai looked at it and flipped it off.

Ace didn't.

She watched the room the way she watched predators: by looking for the intent behind the architecture.

This room wasn't built to hold prisoners. It was built to hold variables.

Bright's voice came through a ceiling speaker now, not a portable unit.

"Sit," he said.

Mai didn't sit. She paced two steps, then sat anyway because her ribs made the decision for her. She hissed through her teeth, face hard with annoyance at her own biology.

Ace sat. Quiet. Still.

A panel in the wall opened with a soft click. A tray slid out: food that looked like it had been designed by an accountant—protein bars, water, a sealed cup of coffee that might actually be coffee.

Mai grabbed the coffee and sniffed it suspiciously. "Is this poisoned?"

Bright's voice had the smallest hint of dry humor. "Only emotionally."

Mai took a sip and sighed like she'd forgiven the Foundation for one (1) crime.

Ace didn't reach for anything yet.

Bright continued. "We're going to do a structured check. Not interrogation. Not therapy." A pause. "Not a ritual. Just calibration."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "You say 'not a ritual' like you know what we just crawled out of."

"I do," Bright said. "I've read the logs. I've seen the patterns. I've made enough mistakes to recognize when someone else is trying to make them faster."

Ace's voice came out quiet. "What's the goal?"

"The goal," Bright said, "is to determine whether that harmonic fingerprint is passive...or if it can be used as a locator."

Mai leaned forward. "Meaning: can they track her?"

"Yes."

Ace's fingers flexed once. "And if they can."

Bright didn't sugarcoat. "Then we assume anywhere with infrastructure is vulnerable. We assume

they can ride power grids, tunnels, data lines—anything that carries flow. And we pick environments that don't carry flow."

Mai's stare sharpened. "You're talking about wilderness."

"I'm talking about isolation," Bright corrected. "Ocean is better than land. Steel hulls are better than cities. And if you must be in a facility, you pick one that's built like a coffin."

Mai's smile turned sharp. "Charming."

Ace looked down at the sealed coffee cup, then at her hands.

Inside her ribs, the three-beat pulse continued.

Not louder.

Just...there.

Violet sat behind the lock, quiet, attentive, enjoying the sensation of being relevant.

Ace spoke inside her head, not as a plea, but as a command with boundaries.

Stay quiet.

Violet's response was a warm, amused ripple.

I am quiet, she purred. You're the one vibrating.

Ace hated how true that felt.

Bright's voice shifted into procedural mode. "Ace. I'm going to ask you to breathe to a metronome. Then I'm going to play a sequence of tones. You tell me if any of them feel like the three-beat pulse. Don't fight it. Don't chase it. Just observe."

Mai muttered, "Raw data first," as if reminding herself and everyone else how to survive being alive.

Ace nodded once. "Do it."

A soft click, and the room's speaker began to tick—slow, steady.

Ace matched her breathing to it.

In. Hold. Out.

The first tone came—low, almost below hearing. It hummed in the bones more than the ears.

Nothing.

Second tone—higher, thin, sharp.

Ace felt a slight itch behind her eyes, but no pulse response.

Third tone—layered, a chord that wasn't pleasant.

The three-beat rhythm in her ribs twitched, just once.

Mai's head snapped up. "There."

Ace held her breath for half a second, then exhaled slowly.

"Yes," Ace said quietly. "That one."

Bright's voice went tight. "Copy. Fourth tone."

The fourth tone was subtle—almost pretty, if you didn't listen too hard. Like a lullaby filtered through a machine.

Ace's ribs tightened. The pulse didn't just twitch; it leaned toward it, like iron toward a magnet.

And Violet—

Violet pressed against the lock, not hard, but with a kind of interest that made Ace's skin crawl.

Mai's voice cut in immediately. "Stop."

Bright didn't stop.

The tone continued for two more seconds.

Ace's vision flickered red at the edges. Not a full memory. A smear of candlelight. The shape of hands held out. A hymn line she couldn't hear but could taste.

Ace's jaw clenched. Shadow-pressure tightened around her like a belt.

Mai stood up so fast her ribs punished her and she didn't care. She stepped into Ace's space, face close, silver-blue eyes hard enough to pin Ace to the present.

"Ace," Mai said, low and sharp. "Here."

Ace's gaze snapped to Mai.

Anchor.

The pulse in her ribs faltered, annoyed.

The tone stopped abruptly.

Bright's voice came immediately after, too calm to be accidental. "Copy. That was enough. Sorry."

Mai glared at the ceiling speaker like she could intimidate a building. "Don't do that again."

Bright's exhale crackled faintly. "I won't. I got what I needed."

Ace breathed, slow, controlled, forcing her body to remember it belonged to her.

"What did you get," Ace asked.

Bright's answer came with the kind of clinical honesty that made people hate him and also kept them alive.

"I got confirmation that the harmonic fingerprint is responsive," he said. "That means it's not just

residue. It's an interface."

Mai's voice went flat. "So they can ping her."

"They can," Bright said. "And if they can ping, they can triangulate."

Ace stared at the wall like she could see through it to Tokyo's veins.

"So," Ace said, voice steady, "we go somewhere they can't ping from."

Bright: "Yes."

Mai's mouth twisted. "Boat."

Bright didn't deny it. "Boat."

Ace's fingers curled around the edge of the chair, knuckles whitening, not from fear—from anger.

Because she wasn't just being hunted anymore.

She was being addressed.

And something deep inside her—behind a lock she'd forged with her own will—liked being addressed far too much.

Mai saw Ace's knuckles whiten and put her hand over Ace's, firm and grounding.

"No spiraling," Mai said quietly.

Ace swallowed once. "Not spiraling."

Mai raised an eyebrow.

Ace corrected, honest. "Not yet."

Mai's mouth twitched—half fond, half furious. "Good. Then we keep it that way."

Bright's voice softened slightly, not kind, but human enough to matter. "You both did well today. You broke a pattern-engine. You shut a breach manually. And you didn't give them what they wanted."

Mai snorted. "We also ruined a perfectly good morning."

Ace didn't smile, but something in her shoulders eased a fraction.

Bright continued, business again. "You have six hours here. Eat. Rest. Then we move you. No city routes. No tunnels. No grids. We go quiet."

The speaker clicked off.

The room's ticking metronome stopped.

Silence settled—not the ritual silence, not the predator silence. Just the normal silence of people in a box with too many thoughts.

Mai took another sip of coffee and grimaced. "Okay. It's still brown regret."

Ace finally reached for a protein bar, tore it open with her teeth, and chewed like she was trying to prove she was still made of human routine.

Mai watched her for a moment, then said, very quietly, "You held it."

Ace didn't pretend not to understand. "I almost didn't."

Mai leaned back, eyes on the ceiling, voice rough. "Almost doesn't count. You're here."

Ace swallowed. The pulse in her ribs continued, patient.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

And Ace, for the first time that day, let herself admit the real fear:

Not that Order would find her.

But that when they did—

—some part of her would be tempted to answer.

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