



Chapter 2: Protocol Ghosts

The photo in the envelope wasn't dramatic.

It didn't need to be.

A tunnel mouth. Concrete jaws, wet with old seepage. A security gate bent inward like something had decided it didn't want to be locked anymore. The timestamp was recent. The file header was sterile. The implication wasn't.

Mai held the image by one corner, as if touching more of it might make the place real faster.

"This isn't Tokyo," she said.

Ace watched the street through the café window. Morning traffic. People in coats, earbuds, umbrellas still dripping from the earlier rain. Normal lives moving in clean lines.

"No," Ace agreed. "It's close enough to be a warning."

Mai flipped the envelope and found the second page—Foundation printout, condensed like someone had to fit panic into a template:

SECONDARY SITE. SIGNAL: RESIDUAL EMBER RESONANCE. ORDER SIGNATURE: CONFIRMED.
RECOMMENDED RESPONSE: FIELD TEAM A/M. SUPPORT: REMOTE.

Mai's mouth tightened at the last word. "Remote."

Ace's lips twitched. "They're learning. Or pretending they are."

Mai slid the papers back, eyes narrowing. "Or they don't want to be in the room if something goes wrong."

Ace didn't answer. She didn't have to. Both readings were compatible.

They walked.

Not fast. Not slow. The kind of pace you used when you didn't want the city to think you were running.

Foundation vehicles waited two blocks away, parked like any other vans in the morning sprawl. Matte paint. No markings. The drivers looked like contractors. They were too still to be anything but trained.

A side door opened without anyone touching it.

Mai climbed in first, because Mai always checked the interior angles before anyone else did. Ace followed, ducking her head under the frame. The van smelled like cold coffee and polymer gear and the faint metallic bite of sterile environments.

Inside, a thin screen lit up. A voice came through without introduction.

"Good morning."

Bright.

Mai's eyes rolled so hard it almost counted as exercise. "If you say 'sorry to drag you in,' I'm going to throw your speaker out the window."

A pause. A soft exhale that might have been a laugh or might have been a man dying inside.

"Noted," Bright said. "You're both cleared. Route is uploaded. The site is an old maintenance access linked to a decommissioned line. No public foot traffic, but...don't count on privacy."

Ace sat back against the bench, hands on her thighs, posture relaxed in a way that was purely mechanical. Her eyes stayed on the screen.

"Who else is there?" she asked.

Bright didn't answer immediately.

That was always the tell.

"We have—" he began, stopped, then corrected himself like he'd caught a lie forming. "We have shadows."

Mai frowned. "Define shadow."

"Sensor anomalies," Bright said. "Movement without thermal. Audio signatures without source. And this—"

The screen changed. A waveform appeared, uneven but repeating in a pattern that made Ace's molars ache.

Three beats.

Pause.

Three beats.

Mai's fingers tightened around the edge of her seat. "They're knocking again."

"They're signaling," Bright said. "We don't know if it's invitation, bait, or an attempt to map your response time."

Ace's gaze didn't move. "All of the above."

Bright's voice dipped. "Probably."

The van rolled forward. Tokyo's streets slipped past in a blur of gray glass, clean signage, and people who didn't know the underworld existed beneath their feet. Somewhere between districts, the skyline changed. Less corporate. More industrial. The kind of places where buildings didn't get renovated—they got repurposed.

Mai leaned her head back against the van wall and closed her eyes, letting pain settle into a manageable shape. Her hand drifted to her wrapped wrist, fingers flexing as if testing the range.

Ace watched her without staring, the way you watched a candle flame when the room was otherwise dark.

Mai opened one eye. "Don't."

Ace's mouth twitched. "Don't what?"

"Don't do the 'quiet martyr' thing," Mai said, voice low. "If you're spiraling, say it."

Ace looked down at her own hands.

Inside her ribs, Violet moved.

Quiet. Contained. Listening.

It didn't claw like before. It didn't press like a storm front. It sat like a blade she'd locked in a drawer and kept the key to.

"I'm not spiraling," Ace said.

Mai's eye narrowed. "That wasn't an answer. That was a defense."

Ace exhaled slowly.

“Fine,” she said. “I’m...aware.”

Mai nodded once, satisfied. “Good. Awareness is step one. Step two is you not trying to be heroic alone.”

Ace glanced at her. “I’m not alone.”

Mai’s expression softened for the smallest moment. Then she made it sharp again, because softness was a liability when you walked into traps.

“Good,” Mai repeated. “Keep it that way.”

The van slowed. Turned off a main road onto a service lane that looked like it existed purely for pipes and delivery trucks. Concrete walls rose on either side, tagged with faded graffiti and streaked with rain residue.

A gate loomed ahead. Chain-link, bent inward. A padlock hung broken, snapped clean like it had been cut by something that didn’t care about metal.

The driver didn’t speak. Just parked, killed the engine, and opened the door.

Ace stepped out first. The air here was colder, heavy with damp and the smell of algae and old electric insulation. A place where the city’s bones showed.

Mai followed, pulling her Foundation-issued jacket tighter with visible contempt. The disruptor sat in her grip, runes dim.

The gate creaked when Ace touched it.

Not because it was old.

Because it remembered being forced.

They walked through.

The access tunnel beyond was wide enough for maintenance carts, lined with cable trays and old signage. Emergency lights flickered at long intervals, turning the corridor into a slow strobe of white and shadow.

The deeper they went, the more the air changed.

Not temperature. Not humidity.

Presence.

Ace’s shadow-pressure aura brushed outward reflexively, tasting the space. The tunnel tasted like metal and stagnant water and—under it—something dry.

Incense dust.

Mai’s voice was quiet. “You feel it.”

Ace nodded. “Order.”

Bright's voice crackled faintly through Ace's ear comm. "We're getting signal distortion. If you lose me—"

"We won't cry," Mai muttered.

Bright ignored her. Professionally. "If you lose me, the last ping was at the junction ahead. There should be a maintenance alcove—"

The comm hissed.

Ace stopped. Not because the comm cut, but because the tunnel ahead had...shifted.

The lights were the same. The pipes were the same. But the distance between two warning signs suddenly looked too long, like someone had stretched the corridor by a meter and hoped nobody would notice.

Mai saw it too. Her posture tightened, pistol lifting.

"Reality's getting sloppy," Mai whispered.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "No."

Mai glanced at her. "No?"

Ace's voice was calm. "Reality's getting edited."

The words landed with weight.

Because sloppy meant accident.

Edited meant intent.

They reached the junction.

A maintenance alcove opened on the right—metal door half ajar, darkness behind it. The air around the doorway felt dense, like humidity clinging to a surface.

Mai's disruptor hummed faintly, runes brightening in reaction to nearby structure.

Ace didn't rush.

She stood at the threshold and listened.

No chanting.

No obvious movement.

Just that pulse, faint and patient, threading through the walls like a heartbeat.

Three beats.

Pause.

Three beats.

Invitation.

Mai's voice was barely a breath. "Ace. This feels like the warehouse."

Ace didn't answer immediately.

Inside her, Violet shifted. Not pushing. Just...watching, curious.

Ace's jaw tightened. She didn't like curiosity from things that wanted to wear her skin.

She stepped into the alcove.

The dark inside wasn't empty.

It was full of something that didn't have mass but still took up space.

A presence like a curtain hanging in still air.

Ace's shadow-pressure aura touched it.

The curtain shimmered.

And the alcove's metal door swung shut behind them with a soft click.

Mai spun, disruptor raised.

"Okay," Mai said flatly. "So that's that."

Ace didn't move.

Because the alcove wall in front of her had a new mark.

Not paint. Not chalk.

A sigil burned into the metal like a brand.

Order's signature.

And beneath it, written in a neat, almost polite hand—

SILENT VESSEL.

Mai's breath hitched.

Ace stared at the words, and for the first time since the integration room, her calm slipped—not into fear, but into something colder.

Recognition.

Because she hadn't told anyone that phrase.

Not Mai.

Not Bright.

Not the Foundation.

And yet the metal in front of her wore it like a name tag.

From somewhere in the darkness beyond the alcove, a voice spoke—soft, intimate, too close to the inside of Ace’s skull.

“Hello again,” Violet’s echo purred. “They’re learning your language.”

Ace didn’t turn her head.

Her voice came out quiet, lethal.

“No,” she said. “They’re stealing it.”

And then the wall behind the sigil rippled—like water pretending to be steel—and began to open.

[ace](#), [mai](#), [bright](#)

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