



## Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

### Ace 1: The Demon Huntress — Chapter 43 - The People Who Don't Blink

**Story:** Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 1.43 **Wordcount:** ~1117 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Bright **Location:** Unknown **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

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Chapter 43: The People Who Don't Blink

Engineering arrived like a weather front.

Not loud. Not dramatic. Just inevitable.

Two people in gray coveralls, one carrying a hard case, the other carrying a laminated binder thick enough to qualify as a melee weapon. They didn't ask permission to exist in the corridor. They simply

started mapping.

Clipboard stood in the doorway of Ace's room while they worked outside, listening to their clipped jargon.

"Resonance path through chilled water loop..." "...harmonic carry at 37-41Hz..." "...unexpected coupling at ventilation mesh..."

Bright leaned against the wall, arms folded, eyes narrowed.

Mai sat close to Ace, hand still on her wrist, like she'd decided gravity was optional but anchoring wasn't.

Ace felt the building's "pipe-groan" cycle again—faint—then nothing.

The tug in her sternum attempted to spike.

It didn't.

It hit the layered dampeners and fuzz and just...slid.

Frustrated.

Mai noticed the micro-flinch anyway. "Hook?"

Ace breathed wrong, fast, then slower. "Tried."

Mai's eyes narrowed in satisfaction. "Failed."

Clipboard nodded once. "Good. That confirms the fix is working."

Bright muttered, "So someone tried to use the building like a speaker."

Clipboard's gaze stayed cold. "Yes."

Mai's voice was quiet and sharp. "And someone tried to use a medical order like a crowbar."

Clipboard didn't deny it. "Yes."

She stepped into the room, closed the door, and deadbolted it herself—slow, deliberate, loud enough to be a promise.

Then she set her clipboard on the table and finally, for the first time, gave them something that felt like a conclusion rather than a reaction.

"I have identities," she said.

Bright's posture changed instantly. "Real ones?"

Clipboard nodded. "Real enough."

Mai's grip tightened on Ace's wrist. "Talk."

Clipboard spoke like she was reading a coroner's report.

"The first voice at the door is facility medical staff. Legitimate badge. Not their idea." "The second voice—'stand down'—is a mid-level operational controller attached to Maritime Containment." "And the authorization chain for sedation on the platform routes through an internal relay cluster tied to—"

She paused and looked at Bright.

Bright's mouth twisted. "Don't say it."

Clipboard did anyway. "—a compartment that reports to memetics oversight."

Mai's eyes went dead cold. "So memetics is policing memetics."

Bright laughed once, humorless. "Classic."

Ace swallowed. "Does that mean Violet—"

Clipboard cut her off gently but firmly. "No. It does not mean Violet is in the chain. It means someone is playing games where Violet operates."

Mai's gaze sharpened. "Then who was the interface handler?"

Clipboard's eyes didn't soften. "Not a ghost. A person with a file."

She slid a single printed photo across the table.

Mai snatched it first.

Ace saw it over her shoulder.

A woman. Dark hair. Clean posture. Not smiling. Eyes that looked like they'd been trained to look through people instead of at them.

Mai's voice went tight. "That's her."

Bright nodded once. "Same face. Same calm."

Clipboard: "Name redacted on purpose. But the role is clear: contracted interface specialist. Clearance acquired through a proxy program. Authorization path abused. Someone wanted plausible deniability."

Mai's jaw clenched. "Where is she now?"

Clipboard's pause was honest. "Gone."

Bright's eyes narrowed. "Gone as in evacuated?"

Clipboard shook her head. "Gone as in her badge was used after she was already offsite. Gone as in the platform logs show her walking into a corridor that cameras didn't cover."

Mai's voice was low and vicious. "Someone extracted her."

Clipboard nodded once. "Yes."

Bright stared at the photo like it might bite him. "So we triggered a cleanup."

Clipboard's voice was flat. "Yes."

Mai's eyes flicked to Ace. "And that means—"

Clipboard finished it. "—you were not a test. You were a result they wanted, and they are now trying to control who sees it."

Ace's sternum tugged faintly at the word result.

Mai squeezed her wrist. "No handshake."

Ace breathed wrong. "No handshake."

Clipboard watched it, then continued.

"The good news," she said calmly, "is that attempted cleanup creates paper trails. People can erase footage. They cannot erase every door access record, every procurement ticket, every sedation authorization copy, every relay configuration change."

Bright's mouth twisted. "Paper teeth."

Clipboard nodded once. "Paper teeth."

Mai leaned back slightly, pain etched into her face for a second before she hid it again. "So what happens to me and Ace."

Clipboard looked at Ace, then Mai.

"You stay here," she said. "For now. You will be medically assessed properly. You will be debriefed under controlled conditions. You will not return to the platform. And you will not be used as an operational asset until this is understood."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Who's going to stop 'operational needs'."

Clipboard's answer was immediate. "Me."

Bright sighed. "And when 'me' isn't enough?"

Clipboard's eyes went colder. "Then I move it above the people who are currently pretending this is contained."

Bright stared. "You're going to drag Oversight into it."

Clipboard didn't blink. "Yes."

Mai's smile was thin and feral. "Good."

Ace swallowed. "And the responder. The thing in the water."

Clipboard looked at Ace for a long second before answering, like she refused to insult her with easy comfort.

"We have acoustic assets going dark in that region," she said. "Not all. But enough to be suspicious. We have signs that something in the medium is still active and still searching."

Mai's eyes tightened. "Searching for Ace."

Clipboard nodded once. "Yes."

Ace's sternum tugged faintly—like hearing its name.

Mai squeezed, immediate. "No handshake."

Ace's breath went ragged. "No handshake."

Clipboard closed her clipboard.

"Here is your actual job for the next twelve hours," she said. "Rest. Stay anchored. Stay human. Let engineering finish sealing resonance channels. Let medical treat pain properly. And let me turn this into a problem that other people are forced to take seriously."

Bright exhaled. "That's...almost reasonable."

Clipboard looked at him. "Don't ruin it."

Bright shut up.

Mai looked at Ace, eyes fierce. "Anchor check."

Ace breathed wrong on purpose—ugly, stubborn. "Here."

Mai nodded. "Good."

Clipboard stood and moved toward the door.

"One more thing," she said without turning fully around.

Bright: "What."

Clipboard's voice was calm, and because it was calm, it was terrifying.

"Someone inside the Foundation wanted to see if the medium could make Ace obey," she said. "Now they know it can't do it easily. That means the next attempt won't be easy either."

Mai's voice was a whisper full of knives. "Let them try."

Clipboard nodded once. "Exactly."

She left.

The deadbolt clacked again.

Silence returned—thick, deliberate silence.

Ace sat on the cot with Mai's hand on her wrist and Bright's presence in the corner like a bad guardian angel, and understood something quietly, without drama:

The chase had ended.

The hunt had started.

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