



## Chapter 9: Extraction Noise

The ladder was older than it had any right to be—metal rungs smoothed by decades of gloved hands, dampness living in the seams. Mai climbed first because Mai didn't trust anything above her head, and Ace followed because Ace didn't trust anything behind her back.

Halfway up, Mai paused, breath shallow. Pain made her blink hard once, then she kept moving like the blink was a mechanical failure she refused to acknowledge.

Ace didn't offer help. Not because she didn't want to—because Mai would interpret it as an insult.

Instead, Ace watched the shaft around them, listening to the way sound behaved. Sound was honest. It bounced where walls existed. It died where walls didn't.

This shaft behaved honestly.

For now.

They reached the access hatch. Mai shoved it up with her shoulder and rolled through, disruptor

raised. Ace followed, katanas low but ready, emerald light muted to a dull glow so it didn't scream here we are into every reflective surface.

The corridor beyond was pure maintenance ugliness: exposed pipes, flaking paint, warning signs in three languages. A place built for nobody's comfort. A place that didn't care about story.

Good.

They moved fast, boots scuffing dust, past a junction where the air smelled faintly like hot electrical insulation. Bright's voice stayed in their ears, tight and intermittent.

"Team is on your right in thirty," he said. "IFF should pick you up—if you see weapons raised, don't—"

Mai snorted. "We don't do sudden movements, got it."

"Ace," Bright added, and there was a subtle shift when he said her name. Less command. More caution. "If you feel that harmonic—if you feel anything like the hymn—say it."

Ace didn't answer immediately. Her jaw worked once.

"I feel...aftertaste," Ace said.

Bright didn't like that word. You could hear it.

"Copy," he said anyway. "Just...talk to me."

Mai glanced at Ace without turning her head fully—an operator's glance, half a check, half a promise. Ace caught it and gave the smallest nod.

Anchor still in place.

They rounded the corner.

Four Foundation operatives stood in the corridor, weapons up but not aimed—ready posture, disciplined, not twitchy. Their helmets were off. Their faces were visible. Human.

The lead stepped forward with one hand raised in a nonthreatening stop sign.

"Mai," he said. Then his eyes flicked to Ace, and his voice went a shade more careful. "Ace. Identify."

Mai's tone was immediate. "If you ask her to state her serial number, I'm shooting you."

The operative's mouth twitched. "Noted. Protocol. Sorry."

Ace's voice came out calm. "Ace. No anomalies observed beyond usual."

The operative nodded once, satisfied enough. "Extraction route is clear. Medical is staged. Bright is—"

"Bright is a voice," Mai muttered.

A second operative stepped closer, eyes on Ace like she was an unexploded device that had learned manners. "We're getting weird readings," she said quietly, not accusatory—just stating a fact the way you'd state weather. "Like...residual resonance."

Mai lifted her chin. "We know. We met it. We broke it. Can we leave before the building decides to

sing again?"

The operative gave a quick hand signal, and the team began moving. Two in front, Ace and Mai in the middle, two behind. Tight formation. Clean.

Ace felt the corridor's normality try to settle on her shoulders like a coat.

Then it failed.

Because the three-beat pulse in her ribs didn't stop.

It wasn't loud. It wasn't forcing anything. It was simply present, like a metronome left running in a room after everyone walked out.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Mai's hand brushed Ace's sleeve once—light contact, barely there. A question without words.

Ace's answer was a slight shift of her shoulder back into the touch.

I'm here.

They moved through an access stairwell, up another level, then out into a service bay that smelled like engine oil and cold rain. Outside, daylight existed, pale and indifferent, the city continuing its life without noticing two women had just crawled out of a nightmare's throat.

A black van waited, doors open. A medic stood ready with a kit that looked like it belonged in a war zone.

Mai climbed in and immediately started arguing with the medic before the medic could speak.

"No," Mai said, pointing at her own ribs like they were a separate person she despised. "You will not sedate me. I need my brain."

The medic sighed like they'd had this argument with her before. "It's pain management."

Mai smiled with teeth. "My pain is managed. It's currently fueling me."

Ace sat opposite, blades sheathed, hands still. Her gaze remained on the open door until it shut. When it did, she felt the small, irrational spike of panic—an old animal response to being sealed into a space.

She breathed through it.

The medic's eyes flicked to Ace. "Any injuries?"

Ace considered. "Superficial."

The medic's gaze lingered on Ace's pupils for half a beat too long, then moved away. Professional. Afraid.

Ace hated that she noticed.

Bright's voice came through the van's speaker, clearer now. "Good. You're out."

Mai leaned back against the wall, wincing, then pretending she hadn't. "You sound disappointed."

Bright didn't rise to it. "I'm looking at the telemetry."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "What does it show?"

Bright paused. Then he spoke like a man choosing his words carefully because words could become reality if you weren't careful.

"It shows the breach signature you closed," Bright said. "And it shows a second signature that briefly overlapped with it. Not Order's standard pattern. Not yours. Not Mai's device."

Mai's expression sharpened. "So what is it?"

Bright exhaled. "Unknown. But it left a harmonic residue on Ace's channel."

Ace's fingers flexed once. "On my channel."

Mai's gaze snapped to Ace. "Define residue."

Bright didn't answer immediately, and that was the answer.

"It's faint," he said finally. "But it's clean. Like someone ran the hymn through a filter and kept only the parts that...lock onto you."

Mai's jaw tightened. "They tuned a hook."

Bright's voice went quieter. "Yes."

Silence fell in the van, thick with the kind of quiet that wasn't empty—it was full of calculations.

Ace stared at her hands.

Inside her ribs, Violet sat behind the lock like a cat behind a door, listening. Not pushing. Not even trying. Just...enjoying the fact that something out there had learned her name.

Ace hated that enjoyment almost more than she hated the fear.

Mai watched Ace carefully, then spoke with deliberate bluntness.

"Talk," Mai said. "Right now."

Ace's breath went in slow. Out slower.

"It feels like..." Ace began, then stopped, choosing truth over poetry. "It feels like someone touched the outside of my skin with a glove. Not enough to grab. Enough to leave an impression."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "And Violet?"

Ace's jaw tightened. "Violet noticed. Violet liked it."

Mai's fingers curled into a fist. "Of course she did."

Bright cut in, voice tight. "Ace. I need you to hear me."

Ace lifted her gaze to the speaker like she could look through it into his face.

Bright continued. “The priest letting himself fall—he wasn’t just being dramatic. That was a handoff. He delivered himself into whatever’s down there.”

Mai’s lip curled. “Let him enjoy it.”

“I would,” Bright said, and there was real anger under his calm now, “if the telemetry didn’t show a momentary uplink during his descent.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “He broadcast.”

“Yes,” Bright said. “And the payload wasn’t just signal. It was...structure. Like he sent them a template.”

Mai’s voice went cold. “Template for what.”

Bright hesitated, then said it anyway. “Template for you.”

The three-beat pulse in Ace’s ribs seemed to get louder in the space of a single heartbeat.

Not because it increased.

Because her attention snapped to it.

Ace forced herself to breathe anyway.

Mai leaned forward, elbows on knees despite pain, gaze hard enough to peel paint.

“So what now?” Mai asked. “Containment? Another quiet room? More contracts?”

Bright’s voice softened slightly, not kind—practical. “Now we get you both out of Tokyo for forty-eight hours.”

Mai blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I said forty-eight,” Bright repeated, like he was reciting a sentence in court. “This isn’t retreat. It’s repositioning. We need to analyze the harmonic. We need to see whether it’s tracking you via infrastructure. And we need you away from any major transit hubs while we do it.”

Mai scoffed. “So we hide.”

Bright’s reply came without humor. “We move where the map is cleaner.”

Ace’s gaze flicked to the van door as if she could see through it into the city.

Tokyo kept breathing outside. Millions of lives stacked in concrete and glass. A network full of tunnels and wires—perfect veins for Order to crawl through.

Ace spoke quietly. “It’s already in the city.”

Bright didn’t deny it. “We know. The question is: how much.”

Mai’s voice sharpened. “And the unknown signature?”

Bright paused. "That's the part I don't like."

Mai snorted. "You like any of this?"

Bright's voice went quieter, and there was something like fatigue in it. "I like predictable enemies. I like mistakes I've already made. This...feels like someone new joining the game."

Ace's fingers tightened around nothing.

Violet behind the lock went still, listening like a dog hearing a distant whistle.

Ace spoke before Violet could turn that stillness into a smile.

"What do you want me to do," Ace asked, "right now?"

Bright answered immediately, as if he'd been waiting for her to ask the correct question.

"Sleep," he said. "Eat. Let the adrenaline metabolize. And don't—do not—try to chase the feeling in your ribs. Don't poke it. Don't explore it. Not until we're in a controlled environment."

Mai's mouth twisted. "Good luck."

Ace's voice was flat. "I can do that."

Mai's gaze sharpened. "Can you?"

Ace looked at her.

For a second, there was the raw truth of it: Ace didn't know what she could do until she was forced.

So Ace gave Mai the only honest answer that mattered.

"I'll do it anyway," Ace said.

Mai held her gaze for a long beat.

Then Mai exhaled, and the tension in her shoulders eased just a fraction.

"Okay," Mai said. "Then I'll do my part."

Ace's brow lifted slightly.

Mai's smile was tired and feral. "I'll be annoying at you until you obey."

Bright made a sound over the speaker that might have been relief disguised as a cough. "That's...actually a solid plan."

The van hit a bump. Mai hissed, then forced herself to relax again.

Ace leaned her head back against the padded wall, eyes half-lidded. Not sleeping. Just letting the world stop moving for a second.

Outside, the engine started.

The van rolled.

Tokyo slid away.

And in Ace’s ribs, the three-beat pulse stayed—steady and patient—as if the city hadn’t let go yet.

As if something down in the dark still had the taste of her.

And wanted another bite.

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