

Chapter 1 — The First Tape

Los Angeles didn't sleep.

It just changed masks.

At 2:17 a.m., the city wore its "empty" face — streets half-lit, palms frozen like black cutouts against sodium haze, air thick with that warm, stale perfume of asphalt that never really cools. Somewhere, a helicopter carved circles, not because it needed to, but because it could.

Ace watched the city from the passenger side of a nondescript SUV that screamed rental in every detail except the plates. Her legs didn't reach the floor properly. They never did. She sat compact, folded into herself like a blade returned to a sheath.

Mai drove like she was negotiating with physics: precise, respectful, but not overly friendly. Her hands stayed calm on the wheel. Her eyes did most of the driving.

In the back seat, Shammy occupied space the way weather did — present even when she wasn't moving. She'd pushed her long legs sideways because the seat refused to cooperate with her existence. The cabin felt subtly pressurized, like the air had decided to stand a little straighter.

"Tell me again," Shammy said, peering through the windshield at the smear of downtown lights, "why criminals always pick the ugliest buildings to die in."

Mai didn't look at her. "Because they have taste."

Ace blinked once. "They have habits."

Shammy leaned forward between the seats with a grin that looked like a dare. "Ace just roasted the entire underworld with three syllables."

"That was four," Mai said, turning onto a service road that ran parallel to an industrial lot.

Shammy paused. "Hab-its. Three."

Mai's mouth twitched. It was not a smile. It was an attempt that got caught by professionalism and strangled before it could escape.

Ace, in the front seat, stared ahead. "It was two."

Shammy froze. Then she laughed, the sound quick and bright, like a match struck in a dark room.

Mai exhaled through her nose. "Please do not start a war over syllables while we're driving toward a crime scene."

"A crime scene," Shammy repeated, savoring the phrase. "So normal. So wholesome. So—"

"Don't," Mai said.

Shammy sat back, lips still curved. "I wasn't going to say 'fun.'"

Ace's violet eyes flicked to the rearview mirror, catching Shammy's reflection. "You were."

Shammy put a hand on her chest like she'd been accused in court. "Lies and slander. I was going to

say 'educational.'"

Mai finally smiled, and it was brief, razor-thin. "Worse."

Ace didn't add anything. But the corner of her mouth moved by a fraction. In Ace-terms, that was practically a laugh track.

They rolled past chained gates and stacked shipping containers painted in corporate blues that had long since faded into the color of resignation. The industrial district here wasn't the movie version of LA — no dramatic silhouettes, no clean lines. It was just concrete and rust and dead signage. The kind of place the city forgot on purpose.

Mai slowed as headlights hit the first patrol cars.

Red and blue strobes made the world stutter.

Shammy's gaze sharpened, playful tone evaporating like mist. Ace straightened slightly, the small shift in posture more telling than a drawn weapon. Mai's hands got steadier.

The SUV rolled to a stop behind a line of vehicles. The nearest cop turned, saw them, started to approach — and then, after a glance at Mai's expression, decided he suddenly had somewhere else to be.

"Local PD's already spooked," Mai murmured.

Shammy tilted her head, listening to the air. Not ears. The space between things. "It's... noisy. Not sound. People. Panic."

Ace's eyes tracked the lot. "They found him."

Mai killed the engine and checked her phone. No new messages. No official call. This wasn't something on a normal dispatch chain. It was the kind of scene that spread by rumor first, and then by paperwork afterward.

"Remember," Mai said as she opened her door, "we're contractors. No names. No hero energy."

Shammy climbed out and looked down at her with mock solemnity. "I will do my best to suppress my aura of heroism."

Ace hopped out, boots touching ground light as if the asphalt might crack under her weight. She looked toward the warehouse and didn't blink.

Mai shut her door and gave Shammy a look. "Your aura is not the problem."

Shammy leaned down, voice conspiratorial. "My aura is never the problem."

Ace walked ahead without waiting.

Mai muttered, "She's going to get us killed."

Shammy followed, utterly unbothered. "You say that like it's new."

They moved past tape, past bored uniforms and harsh flashlight beams. A detective with tired eyes tried to intercept them, but he took one look at Ace and hesitated in that way people did when their

instincts screamed predator even if their brains couldn't justify it.

Mai flashed a badge-like card that meant nothing to the city and everything to the right set of people. The detective's eyes flicked over it, his jaw tightened, and he stepped aside.

"No photos," he said. "Media's on the outside screaming. We got drones."

Mai didn't slow. "Keep them outside."

"Trying," he snapped, then lowered his voice as if the warehouse might be listening. "This one's... different."

Ace's head tilted almost imperceptibly. "Different how."

The detective swallowed. "Like... deliberate. Like... somebody staged it for a camera."

Mai's steps didn't falter. "There was a camera?"

"No. That's the thing." He rubbed his face. "It just feels like one."

Shammy's eyes flashed with something like interest, something like irritation. "That's not a feeling you want at two in the morning."

They reached the warehouse entrance.

The air changed as they crossed the threshold — colder, heavier, like the building had been holding its breath.

Inside, fluorescent lighting buzzed in a way that made the shadows jump. The space smelled like old oil and damp cardboard. Somewhere deeper in the warehouse, a faint electronic whine came and went, as if a dying device couldn't decide whether it was still alive.

A handful of cops stood around an open area cleared of clutter. A white sheet covered something on the floor.

Mai saw the pattern before she saw the body: the way officers stood too far back, the way they avoided looking directly at the sheet, the way their hands kept touching their belts like they needed something solid to hold onto.

Ace stepped closer, silent.

Shammy stopped just behind her, tall enough that her shadow stretched over the sheet like a canopy.

Mai approached with the calm of someone who'd seen too much to be startled, and still had the decency to hate it.

The detective lifted the sheet.

The man underneath was dead the way statues were dead — drained of motion, drained of intention. Mid-forties, expensive hair that hadn't met reality in years, a face that had been on the wrong side of enough negotiations to forget what fear felt like.

He'd been killed cleanly. No frenzy. No hesitation. One decisive act, executed with purpose.

But it wasn't the wound that made the room feel wrong.

It was everything around him.

A circle of black tape had been placed on the concrete floor, perfectly round, perfectly measured. The body lay in the center like an exhibit. Two industrial lamps had been dragged into position and aimed down at him, bright enough that the concrete shimmered.

Someone had lit the scene.

"You don't drag lamps if you're in a hurry," Mai said quietly.

"No," Ace agreed. "You drag lamps if you want to be seen."

Shammy took a slow breath, eyes scanning the angles. "He built a stage. Without an audience."

The detective shifted. "We thought it was... some kind of ritual."

Mai looked at the circle, at the placement, at the calculated emptiness. "It's not a ritual."

Ace crouched by the edge of the circle and studied the tape with the focus of a forensic analyst and the stillness of a predator. "It's a frame."

Shammy blinked. "Like... a picture frame."

Ace's gaze lifted, tracking the imaginary lines out from the circle, up toward the lamps, the overhead beams, the corner where shadows pooled.

"A camera would like this," Ace said. "Even if there isn't one."

Mai's eyes followed. She saw it too, now. The composition. The way the lamps created contrast. The way the body was angled — not randomly, but for visibility. For narrative.

Her skin tightened with a cold, familiar discomfort.

"A performance," Mai whispered.

The detective's voice was low. "We found something else."

He gestured, and an officer stepped forward holding a clear evidence bag.

Inside it was... old.

A VHS tape.

Not a prop. Not a novelty. Not one of those modern "retro aesthetic" things you bought at a market. This looked like it had survived decades of heat and dust and being forgotten. The label was blank except for a single black marker symbol: a crude half-circle with two upward strokes.

Not a bat. Not exactly.

But close enough that your brain completed it for you.

Shammy's eyebrows rose. "Oh, that's charming."

Mai didn't smile. "That's bait."

Ace stood, gaze fixed on the tape.

The officer held it out to Mai like he wanted it gone from his hands. "Found it on that pallet, propped up like it was on display."

Mai took the bag, careful. "Anyone touch it?"

"Just gloves," the officer said. "We thought it might be... a message."

"It is," Ace said.

Shammy leaned in, eyes bright with that dangerous mix of curiosity and contempt. "Please tell me someone here still owns a VCR."

The detective gave her a look like she'd asked if anyone had a typewriter. "A what?"

Mai's voice stayed calm, but there was an edge in it now. "Don't play it here."

"Why not?" the detective asked, frustrated. "We have evidence, we have a device, we—"

Mai met his eyes. "Because you don't know what you're inviting into your own head."

The detective faltered.

Ace's gaze flicked to the lamps again. "He wanted it played."

Shammy rocked slightly on her heels, hands behind her back like she was in a museum. "Do you think it's going to be creepy, or creepy creepy?"

Mai ignored her and turned to the detective. "Lock down any footage from this building. Any phone recordings. Any body cam. Anything. This scene was built to leak."

The detective frowned. "We haven't released anything."

Mai's expression didn't change. "You don't have to. People leak themselves."

Shammy's grin returned — smaller, sharper. "He's training the city. Like a dog."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Like a story."

Mai felt the phrase settle into place like a weight.

A story.

Not a killer.

A story with a killer inside it.

She looked down at the VHS bag again. The crude symbol on the label seemed to shift when she wasn't directly focusing on it, like the brain refused to leave it alone.

She could already imagine what it contained. Grainy footage. Distorted audio. A voice that sounded like it had crawled out of a dead broadcast signal.

And worst of all, she could imagine the people who would love it.

Mai slipped the tape into her bag and turned away from the body. "We're leaving. Now."

The detective's eyes widened. "That's it? You're not even—"

Ace spoke without looking at him. "He's already dead."

The detective flinched.

Ace finally looked up. Her violet eyes were calm. Too calm. "The next one won't be an accident."

Shammy's voice was softer now, and that softness made it worse. "And the next one will have an audience."

Mai walked toward the exit. "We keep this out of the city's mouth."

The lights buzzed overhead like insects trapped in glass. Behind them, the staged corpse remained under its lamps, perfectly framed, waiting for a camera that didn't exist.

Or maybe did.

As they stepped out into the night air, Mai's phone vibrated in her pocket.

Unknown number.

No caller ID.

She didn't answer. She didn't need to.

A single text displayed on the screen.

PLAY IT.

Mai stopped walking.

Shammy stopped too, sensing the shift. Ace turned immediately, not toward Mai, but toward the darkness behind the police tape as if she expected someone to be standing there.

Mai held up her phone so they could see.

Shammy's smile vanished. "That's... bold."

Ace's voice was flat. "He's watching."

Mai's fingers tightened around the device until her knuckles whitened. "No."

Shammy leaned in slightly, her eyes catching the city lights like stormwater. "Mai..."

Mai's gaze stayed on the message. "We do not play his game."

Ace looked toward the warehouse entrance, then toward the lot, then toward the skyline beyond. Her mind was moving in angles again. In vectors. In exits.

"He wants a reaction," Ace said.

Mai's voice came out cold. "He gets silence."

Shammy's lips curled faintly. "Silence is still a reaction."

Mai met her eyes. "Not the one he wants."

For a moment the three of them stood there under the pulsing red-blue light, the city humming like a live wire around them, and the tape in Mai's bag felt heavier than it should.

Like it had mass beyond plastic.

Mai slipped her phone away.

"Back to the car," she said. "We hand this off. Offline. Controlled environment. No networks."

Ace nodded once. Shammy followed, unusually quiet.

They didn't notice the small thing at first — the faint glimmer of a screen on the far edge of the lot, in a dark car parked too neatly to belong there.

But Ace did. Ace always did.

She stopped.

Her head tilted.

Mai glanced back. "What?"

Ace's eyes narrowed toward that distant glimmer. "Camera."

Shammy's shoulders rose slightly, the air around her shifting in a way that made loose trash skitter across the asphalt. "We're being filmed?"

Mai's expression hardened. "By him?"

Ace's voice was soft. "By someone."

And in the distance, the faint screen glow went out, like an eye blinking closed.—

© 2025-2026. "World of Ace, Mai and Shammy" and all original characters, settings, story elements, and concepts are the intellectual property of the author. All rights reserved.

Non-commercial fan works are allowed with attribution.

Commercial use, redistribution, or adaptation requires explicit permission from the author.

Contact: editor at publication-x.com

From:
<https://datavault.ws/> - **DataVault**

Permanent link:
<https://datavault.ws/doku.php/canon:ace21:chapter1>

Last update: **31/03/2026 16:21**



