

Chapter 3 — LA Pressure Map

Mai slept for forty minutes.

Not because she wanted to. Because her body filed a complaint and won.

When she woke, it was the kind of wake-up that didn't feel like waking — more like surfacing in cold water, lungs already deciding whether to fight. The safehouse room was dim and aggressively ordinary: beige walls, a cheap lamp, a chair that looked designed to punish posture. The kind of place the Foundation picked because you'd forget it the moment you left.

Mai didn't forget anything.

Her phone was still in the Faraday bag. Good. The bag sat on the metal table beside the dossier, beside the sealed USB, beside a notepad that already had too many arrows and not enough mercy.

Across the room, Ace sat on the floor with her back against the wall, knees drawn up. Awake. Of course. Her katanas were leaned against the chair like they were just... decor. The emerald edges were dormant, but the air around them still felt slightly wrong, like reality had learned to respect sharp things.

Shammy lay sprawled on the couch, limbs impossible, hair a silver storm spilled over the cushions. She looked asleep until Mai noticed her eyes were open and fixed on the ceiling like she was listening to the building's bones.

Mai stared at both of them.

"You know," she said, voice rough, "normal people don't sit in silence like a horror movie waiting to happen."

Ace's gaze shifted to her. "We're not normal."

Shammy raised a hand without looking away from the ceiling. "I can do normal. I'm choosing not to."

Mai walked to the table and poured herself coffee from a machine that had clearly committed crimes against taste. She drank it anyway, because caffeine was less a beverage and more a tool.

"Update," Mai said.

Ace didn't move. "No movement outside. No tail. No new message."

Shammy finally turned her head and smiled sweetly. "No new message that you know of."

Mai stared at her. "Don't."

Shammy's smile widened. "I didn't say I liked it. I said it's possible."

Ace, helpful as ever: "Shammy is correct."

Mai pointed at Ace with her mug. "Do not encourage her."

Ace blinked. "It's not encouragement. It's data."

Shammy sat up, delighted. "Ace called me data."

Mai rolled her eyes. “Everyone shut up for ten seconds.”

They didn’t. But they got quieter, which counted as cooperation in this household.

Mai took out her laptop — the offline one, the one that had never tasted Wi-Fi in its life and was kept in a padded case like a religious relic. She set it on the table, plugged in a cable that went nowhere and ended in a dead adapter, because even habit could be hacked if you let it.

Then she opened the sealed USB, slid it in, and watched the system run a handshake check.

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “You’re letting it touch the machine.”

“It’s air-gapped,” Mai said. “The USB is the only bridge.”

Shammy leaned over her shoulder. “I hate bridges.”

Mai didn’t glance up. “You are a bridge.”

Shammy’s grin turned smug. “Exactly. I know how bad it can get.”

Mai clicked through Bright’s packets. Most of it was what she expected: photos of the scene, local PD chatter, timestamp correlations, a map of initial leak spread. A few pages of Bright’s notes where his handwriting got angrier the more he wrote, like sarcasm was the only thing keeping him from chewing through the paper.

Then the system pinged.

A simple red flag. Not a pop-up. Not a warning. Just an internal label that Mai had installed years ago for one specific situation.

FOUNDATION-ADJACENT SIGNATURE DETECTED

Mai froze.

Ace’s head lifted, instantly. “What.”

Shammy’s smile died. “Oh.”

Mai’s fingers hovered over the keyboard for half a heartbeat.

“Offline scan,” she said carefully. “I’m parsing the repost nodes Bright flagged. One of them is... wrong.”

Ace moved soundlessly, now standing beside Mai as if she’d teleported. She didn’t crowd, but her presence filled the room anyway. “Wrong how.”

Mai swallowed and opened the graph view.

A web of dots bloomed on the screen — the first wave of distribution. Darknet mirrors, private servers, Discord nodes. It was messy, human, ugly in a familiar way.

Then one node blinked a different color.

Clean. Sterile.

It had a name that didn't belong in this city.

Not a real domain. Not a public server. Not even something you could reach from the outside.

A segment tag.

The kind you only saw if you'd lived inside the Foundation long enough to recognize the smell of its architecture.

Mai tapped the screen with her finger.

"This," she said. "This node shouldn't exist in LA. Not like this."

Shammy leaned in closer, eyes narrowing. "That looks... neat. Like it's been ironed."

Ace's gaze sharpened on the cluster. "Foundation."

Mai didn't answer immediately, because saying it made it heavier.

"Yes," she said. "Foundation-adjacent. Not full internal—" She paused, checked the signature again. "—but close enough that it makes my skin crawl."

Shammy sat back, slow. "So either..."

Mai nodded, bitter. "Either the killer is sitting near our house."

Ace's voice was flat. "Or someone is feeding him."

The room went quiet in the way that wasn't calm. Quiet like a weapon being cocked.

Shammy's hands flexed on her knees. The air shifted subtly, pressure rising by half a degree — not lightning, just the atmosphere noticing that her patience was not infinite.

Mai zoomed in, pulled up the node metadata Bright had included. Timestamped access. A hash trail. A routing pattern that looked like it had been carefully designed to appear accidental.

It was almost impressive.

Almost.

Ace pointed at one timestamp. "That one."

Mai followed her finger. "Yeah. That's..." She squinted. "...that's within eight minutes of our arrival at the warehouse."

Shammy's eyes widened, then narrowed. "So he didn't just want us to be filmed. He wanted the footage to go somewhere."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Somewhere that could make it look 'official.'"

Ace's voice was low. "He wants legitimacy."

Shammy's mouth curled, disgusted. "He wants to be a Foundation story."

Mai didn't respond, because her brain was already sprinting. She flipped to Bright's preliminary leak

analysis.

There it was: the first repost wave had a suspicious gap — not missing, not broken, just... redirected.

Someone had caught a piece of it early and moved it to the sterile node like they were archiving it.

Not sharing it.

Saving it.

Mai's coffee went cold in her stomach.

"Okay," she said, voice sharper. "We treat this like a contaminated supply chain."

Shammy blinked. "Wait, what does that mean in human."

Mai shot her a look. "It means we don't trust anything that touches Foundation infrastructure. We assume there's an inside angle until disproven."

Ace nodded once. "Good."

Shammy's expression turned thoughtful, then annoyed. "So we're hunting a guy who's hunting criminals... while being helped by someone who's supposed to hunt guys like him."

Mai's eyes stayed on the screen. "Welcome to institutional comedy."

Shammy stared at her. "Did you just make a joke."

Mai didn't look up. "No."

Ace spoke, too calmly. "Yes."

Shammy grinned. "You're healing."

Mai clicked open another file: environmental notes. She'd started logging it at the warehouse without even thinking — little details, angles, small "wrong" feelings. If the killer wanted narrative, then narrative could be used against him.

"Shammy," Mai said, "I need your map."

Shammy's grin faltered into something more focused. "You want the city-pressure thing."

Mai nodded. "Where fear is moving. Not where it is — where it's going."

Shammy stood. When she moved, the air moved with her. She walked to the window and rested her palm on the glass. The city outside was distant, blurred. A dark ocean of lights.

She closed her eyes.

Mai watched her — not with superstition, but with the same attention she gave any instrument. Shammy wasn't magic in a wand-waving sense. Shammy was a sensor. A living barometer tuned to human turbulence.

Shammy inhaled slowly. The room's atmosphere tightened. Not oppressive. Just... attentive.

“Okay,” Shammy murmured. “It’s not everywhere. That’s the thing. It’s... localized. Hot spots. Like little storms forming.”

Mai opened her notebook. “Tell me where.”

Shammy opened her eyes, pupils reflecting the city as if it were too bright for comfort.

“Downtown,” she said. “But not the obvious parts. Not tourist. Not... shiny. The veins. The service arteries.”

Mai wrote it down.

“Westlake,” Shammy continued. “It’s... thick there. People are scared, but also angry. That’s a bad mix. Fear with teeth.”

Mai scribbled faster.

“And... near a studio district. Not Hollywood proper. Smaller. Someone with equipment. Someone with... old tech. Dust. Metal.”

Mai paused, looked up. “That aligns with the codec signature.”

Ace, quiet: “He’s building episodes.”

Shammy nodded. “And he’s watching who watches.”

Mai’s mind clicked gears. “Okay. Ace— rhythm. What’s next.”

Ace didn’t answer immediately. She stared at the wall for a second as if the warehouse had been painted there and she was looking at it again.

“He won’t repeat,” Ace said. “Not location. Not style. But he will repeat... the feeling.”

Mai frowned. “Define.”

Ace’s voice remained steady, but her eyes sharpened like she was biting down on a truth. “He wants escalation. He wants the city to lean forward.”

Shammy’s tone went dark. “He wants a bigger stage.”

Ace nodded once. “He’ll pick someone who makes people argue.”

Mai stared at her. “A controversial target.”

Ace’s gaze flicked to the screen where the repost graph still glowed. “A target that makes the audience split.”

Shammy’s mouth twisted. “So half the internet claps, half the internet screams, and he gets fed either way.”

Mai exhaled slowly.

“Okay,” she said. “Then we don’t just predict victim. We predict debate.”

Shammy looked at her, brows raised. “You’re going to profile the comment section.”

Mai didn't blink. "Yes."

Shammy's grin returned, bright and wicked. "Oh my God. Mai is going to fistfight a meme."

Ace's expression was deadpan. "Mai will win."

Mai shot Ace a look. "Do not hype me up like I'm going to punch a server rack."

Ace didn't flinch. "You have before."

Shammy's eyes widened with delight. "Wait, you have?"

Mai muttered, "It was one time," like she was confessing to a misdemeanor.

Shammy leaned closer. "Tell me it made a satisfying noise."

Mai refused to answer.

Ace, traitor: "It did."

Shammy laughed, and the sound cut through the tension just enough to let everyone breathe again — which, Mai realized with irritation, was exactly what Shammy did when she wasn't being... Shammy.

Mai clicked deeper into Bright's packet and found a list of "potential amplification nodes." Accounts. Handles. Channels that would jump on this kind of content like starving animals.

She started sorting them — not by follower count, but by behavior.

Who reposted first. Who framed it as justice. Who framed it as horror. Who framed it as entertainment.

She circled one.

"Here," she said.

Ace leaned in. "What."

Mai pointed at the repost timeline. "This account didn't just repost. It tagged. It guided. It told people where to look next."

Shammy peered at the screen. "That's... grossly enthusiastic."

Mai nodded. "It's either a fan... or an operator."

Ace's voice went cold. "Operator."

Mai highlighted the account, pulled up its metadata. There was a location ping buried in the data — imperfect, but suggestive.

A studio-adjacent district.

Shammy's eyes sharpened. "The dust-and-metal place."

Mai's mouth tightened. "We might have our first physical vector."

Ace straightened. "Then we move."

Mai held up a hand. "Not yet."

Shammy groaned theatrically. "Mai—"

Mai's gaze was hard. "We move when we can cut the signal at the same time. If we go in blind and he sees us coming, he'll turn it into an episode. We need to arrive like a scalpel, not like a trailer."

Shammy's grin flickered. "Okay, 'arrive like a scalpel' goes hard."

Ace nodded. "Jello will help."

Mai didn't smile. "Yes. Jello will help."

Shammy tilted her head. "Are you excited to meet him?"

Mai's expression went flat. "No."

Ace spoke, calm as a sentence in a report. "Yes."

Mai gave her a look that could have started a small fire. "Ace."

Ace blinked. "Data."

Shammy cackled. "She can't even deny it now. You got 'data'd."

Mai turned back to the laptop like it was safer than talking to either of them.

She pulled up the sterile node again and stared at it until her eyes watered.

"If he has access to Foundation-adjacent infrastructure..." she said slowly, "then this isn't just a killer playing dress-up."

Shammy's voice softened. "It's a breach."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "It's permission."

Mai felt something cold settle behind her ribs.

"Or it's a test," she said.

Shammy frowned. "Test of what?"

Mai's voice dropped. "Of us."

Ace didn't move. "Then we fail it."

Shammy's mouth curled. "I like that answer."

Mai closed the laptop and slid it back into its case.

"Alright," she said. "We do three things today."

Shammy raised a hand instantly. "Can one of them be 'eat food that isn't punishment.'"

Mai stared at her. "No."

Shammy's hand dropped. "Cruelty."

Mai held up a finger. "One: we isolate that sterile node. If it's internal bleed, we find the seam."

Second finger. "Two: we build the pressure map. Where fear is forming, where attention is going."

Third finger. "Three: we prepare for Theta-24."

Shammy's eyes lit. "Badger."

Mai's gaze stayed flat. "Yes. Badger."

Ace, quietly: "Walking War Crimes."

Shammy's grin widened. "Walking War Crimes."

Mai rubbed her forehead like she could physically compress the headache into something smaller.

Then her laptop case vibrated.

Not her phone. Not a network message.

A vibration through the bag.

Mai froze.

Ace's head snapped toward it. "What."

Shammy's smile vanished instantly. "That bag shouldn't do that."

Mai's pulse jumped. She opened the case in one sharp motion, fingers already moving to kill power—

The laptop screen was on.

It hadn't been on.

And on the black background, in clean white text, a line was already typed.

YOU DIDN'T PLAY IT.

Another line appeared beneath it.

Like someone was typing live.

GOOD GIRL.

Mai went utterly still.

Shammy's eyes went bright, storm-charged, furious. "Oh— no. No no no. Absolutely not."

Ace's voice was quiet, lethal. "He's inside."

Mai's fingers hovered over the keyboard. Her mouth tasted like metal.

Then, before she could shut it down, a third line appeared.

NEXT LOCATION: WHERE THE CITY MAKES DREAMS.

And then the screen cut to black, dead and innocent, like it had never betrayed her.

Shammy stared at it, breathing slow, controlled. "Mai..."

Mai's voice came out ice-cold.

"We're not just hunting a killer."

Ace's violet eyes narrowed to slits. "We're hunting a path."

Mai snapped the laptop shut like she was closing a coffin.

"And," she said, standing, "we're calling Bright."

Shammy cracked her neck once, a storm preparing itself. "Finally."

Ace picked up her katanas, the emerald glow waking like something stretching after sleep.

"Where the city makes dreams," Ace repeated softly.

Mai's jaw clenched.

"Studios," she said.

Shammy's smile returned, but it wasn't playful.

"Season One," she murmured. "Let's cancel it."

Proceeeeeeeed! 😬 —

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