



Chapter 10 — The Lock That Isn't a Lock

The van rolled through the industrial grid like a gray thought nobody wanted to claim.

Ace drove with her hands steady and her attention split into clean slices: mirrors, intersections, reflections, the negative space between streetlights. Mai sat angled toward the recorder again, watching the waveform like it might suddenly decide to behave if she stared hard enough.

It didn't.

The warble had faded, but the noise floor still felt... tilted. Like the recording wasn't capturing sound so much as arguing with it.

Ace broke the silence first, because silence was starting to feel like a ritual—and rituals were now a liability.

"So," Ace said, tone dry, "your Controlled Chaos Plan™ includes breaking into fences and talking to empty air."

Mai didn't look up. "Yes."

Ace waited.

Mai added, clipped: "And not using the heater."

Ace's mouth twitched. "My favorite part."

Mai finally glanced at her. "Stop fishing for jokes. We need you sharp."

Ace's eyes stayed on the road. "I am sharp."

Mai's gaze slid down to Ace's katanas—two wrapped hilts, muted green pulse, alive in that quiet way blades sometimes were when they'd tasted wrongness and remembered it.

"You're sharp," Mai corrected. "Your brain is currently trying to turn the night into a pattern so it can relax."

Ace's jaw tightened. "And if it relaxes, it loses."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Ace exhaled once—short, contained. "Fine. No fishing."

They took a left that didn't need to be taken, then another, then a slow loop behind a warehouse where the security lights were either broken or tired. Ace parked under a concrete overhang where the van became just another shadow.

Mai reached forward and turned the interior dome light switch to off. Not because they needed darkness, but because even light had started to feel like a cue.

Ace killed the engine.

For a moment, the van held its breath.

Mai listened—literal listening, ear tuned to small shifts, the way you listened for a predator in tall grass.

Nothing.

The recorder hiss stayed steady.

Mai exhaled quietly. "Okay."

Ace blinked. "That's not your usual 'okay.'"

Mai's mouth tightened. "It's an 'okay' that means we have five minutes before something tries something."

Ace's lips curved faintly. "Optimistic."

Mai didn't smile. "Practical."

Ace leaned back in the driver's seat and let her eyes drift half-closed—not sleep, just that razor-thin rest she could take without lowering her guard. She could feel Violet inside her like a silent second

heartbeat that refused to align with anything human.

Mai opened her notebook, and the pen moved again.

Ace watched the pen for a second too long.

Mai noticed. "Don't."

Ace raised a brow. "Don't what."

Mai's eyes didn't leave the page. "Don't start associating the pen sound with safety."

Ace stared. Then she huffed a laugh under her breath. "You're insane."

Mai's voice was flat. "Yes."

Ace shifted slightly, then—because she couldn't help herself—murmured, "I love you."

Mai didn't look up. "Good."

Ace squinted. "That's it? Just 'good'?"

Mai's pen paused for a fraction. "Yes."

Ace's mouth quirked. "You're being stingy with affection."

Mai resumed writing. "I'm being stingy with patterns."

Ace blinked slowly, then nodded once. "Fair."

Mai reached for the van's fuse box cover near the steering column. She popped it open with a small tool from her kit and started scanning the diagram.

Ace watched. "What are you doing?"

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Removing variables."

Ace's brow rose. "That sounds like you."

Mai pulled one fuse, then another, then held them up like tiny trophies. "Central locking. Cabin fan. Auxiliary power."

Ace stared. "You're disarming the van."

Mai glanced at her. "I'm preventing the van from becoming a door."

Ace's jaw tightened. "It can use that?"

Mai didn't answer right away. She slid the fuses into a small labeled bag and sealed it. Then she spoke carefully.

"It used the heater because it's a comfort channel," Mai said. "Locks are permission channels. If it can mimic 'unlock' behind you, it can try to make your body accept 'open' as normal."

Ace swallowed once. "So you're making sure it can't even pretend the van unlocked itself."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Ace's mouth pulled thin. "You're good at this."

Mai looked up sharply, as if praise was a threat. "Stop."

Ace held her gaze. "Not praise. Observation."

Mai stared for a beat longer, then returned to the fuse box with a tight nod. "Fine."

They sat in the dark van with the windows cracked for honest air. The city hummed around them like a distant machine. No taps from the bag. No door sounds. No footsteps.

Three minutes passed.

Four.

Mai's shoulders loosened a millimeter.

Then the van's rear door made a sound.

Not a slam.

Not a creak.

A soft, precise metallic click—the kind you got when a latch seated itself.

Ace didn't move.

Mai didn't move.

The sound came again—two clicks, close together.

Ace's eyes opened fully, violet and sharp. "That's the rear latch."

Mai's voice was low. "And the central locking is dead."

Ace's hand drifted to one katana hilt—not drawing, not threatening, just touching something real.

Mai's gaze flicked to the bag where the fuses were sealed. Then back to the rear door.

The latch clicked a third time.

Then a pause.

Then a single, careful tap—not on a device, not from a speaker.

On the van's metal skin.

Ace felt it in her bones more than in her ears. A knuckle on steel.

Mai's eyes narrowed to slits. "No infrastructure."

Ace's voice was flat. "Still knocking."

Mai didn't answer the words. She refused the frame. She reached for the recorder and watched the waveform.

The hiss shifted. The noise floor tilted again, making room for something that wasn't sound but wanted to be.

A low, slow swell.

Like breath.

Mai's jaw clenched. "It's syncing again."

Ace stared at the rear door, unblinking. "It wants us to turn around."

Mai's voice sharpened, controlled. "We don't."

Ace's mouth quirked faintly, humor trying to keep her human. "I'm going to start charging it rent."

Mai shot her a look. "Don't negotiate."

Ace raised a hand. "Not negotiating. Mocking."

Mai's eyes stayed on the recorder. "Mock quietly."

Ace actually nodded. "Okay."

The rear latch clicked again.

Then—soft, domestic, almost comically out of place—came the sound of a wooden door opening.

Inside the van.

No speaker. No radio. No intercom. Just air and the seam's talent for lying.

Ace's stomach turned. The sound was too right. Hinges, pressure release, that faint hush of a room becoming accessible.

Mai's hand found Ace's wrist—firm, real, anchor pressure.

Ace's breath hitched once, then steadied.

Mai leaned in closer, voice low enough that it was almost a secret. "We do not give it the satisfaction of a flinch."

Ace whispered back, "I already flinched internally."

Mai's mouth tightened. "Then you don't flinch externally."

Ace nodded once.

A pause.

Then a new sound—small, intimate, infuriatingly familiar.

Fabric rustling.

Not random fabric. The specific soft scrape of a jacket sleeve being adjusted.

Mai's jacket sleeve.

Not exact.

Close enough.

Mai's eyes went cold in a way that had nothing to do with fear. "No."

Ace felt Violet go perfectly still again—recognition-still, predator-still. It wasn't helping. It was observing, and that observation made Ace feel less alone and more hunted at the same time.

Mai did not turn around.

Instead, she did something that felt almost stupid—and therefore brilliant.

She reached into her bag, pulled out a cheap plastic whistle—an emergency thing she'd bought years ago and never used—and blew it once.

A harsh, ugly shriek of sound that had no warmth, no domestic meaning, no "home" in it at all.

Ace blinked.

The recorder waveform spasmed.

The "breath" pulse stuttered.

Mai blew the whistle again—different length, different rhythm, deliberately irregular.

Ace stared at her like she'd just kicked a god in the shin. "Mai."

Mai didn't look at her. "Noise breaks synchronization."

Ace's mouth twitched. "You just attacked it with kindergarten."

Mai's eyes stayed hard. "Yes."

The rear latch clicked once more—almost irritated.

Mai blew the whistle a third time, then stopped.

Silence dropped back into place.

The clean-metal scent, which had begun creeping into the van again like a suggestion, thinned.

Mai watched the recorder. The waveform leveled.

The "breath" pulse faded, sulking into hiss.

Ace exhaled slowly. "That... worked."

Mai nodded once, restrained and precise. "It doesn't know what to do with meaningless sound."

Ace's lips curved. "So we become annoying."

Mai finally looked at her. “We become non-cooperative.”

Ace’s grin flashed—small, sharp, alive. “I can do non-cooperative.”

Mai’s gaze softened by a hairline crack. “I know.”

Ace reached for the HARD LINE brick and tapped it on. “Bright.”

Static, then Bright’s voice, immediate and tense. “Report.”

Mai spoke quickly, cleanly. “It attempted a door cue inside the van without infrastructure. Rear latch clicks, metal taps, wooden-door sound. It tried fabric rustle mimicry. We disrupted sync with irregular high-frequency noise. Recorder pulse collapsed.”

Bright was quiet for a moment—processing, calculating.

Then: “Good.”

Ace narrowed her eyes. “That’s a better ‘good’ than earlier.”

Bright didn’t bite. “It’s a better situation than earlier. Keep doing what disrupts synchronization. Random noise. Temperature variation. Movement.”

Mai added, clipped: “We pulled van locking and fan fuses.”

Bright exhaled like he approved but didn’t want to sound like it. “Smart.”

Ace muttered, “She hates praise.”

Mai shot Ace a look.

Bright continued, voice dropping a notch. “I want you at a field office at dawn. Not a base, not your safehouse. Temporary location. Clean room, analog logging, a couple people who won’t get in your way.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “People.”

Bright answered quickly. “Minimal. And not idiots.”

Ace’s tone stayed dry. “That’s a bold promise.”

Bright ignored it. “You have about three hours. Rotate twice before you park. Do not let it settle into your timing. And if it tries the door cue again—”

Mai answered, automatic. “No response.”

Bright’s voice softened a fraction. “Good.”

Call ended.

Mai turned the brick off, then sat very still for half a second, listening to her own blood and the van’s cooling metal.

Ace watched her, then said quietly, “That whistle thing was... kind of incredible.”

Mai's eyes flicked to her. "Don't."

Ace raised both hands in surrender. "Observation."

Mai held the look, then returned it with the smallest nod. "Fine."

They started moving again—because movement was refusal.

As Ace drove, they passed an office building with a single lit window on the third floor. A figure stood there for a second, framed by fluorescent light—just a person, just watching the night, nothing special.

Except Ace's skin prickled.

She glanced again.

The figure was still there, unmoving, head angled slightly as if it knew exactly where she was.

Ace's mouth went thin.

Mai noticed. "What."

Ace kept her eyes on the road, voice low. "That guy."

Mai's gaze flicked to the window too late—the van had already passed. "What guy."

Ace's tone was flat, and for once the humor didn't show up on time. "I've seen him before."

A beat.

Then she added, almost to herself, a quiet, disbelieving edge: "What the hell."

Mai didn't press. She didn't ask for a description. She just reached over and touched Ace's wrist once—anchor pressure, human confirmation.

"Log it," Mai said.

Ace nodded. "Yeah."

They drove on, headlights cutting through wet streets, refusing routines, refusing doors, refusing the seam's soft invitations.

And somewhere in the wrong space between locks and warmth and names, something listened—less confident now, a little annoyed, still patient.

It hadn't gotten in.

But it had learned something important:

They could be synchronized.

And they could be disrupted.

So the next attempt wouldn't be prettier.

It would be smarter.

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