



Chapter 11 — Dawn Is a Procedure

Ace did the rotation like she was trying to confuse a god with roadwork.

Two loops. One dead-end. A slow glide through a residential block where every window looked identical and therefore untrustworthy. Then a swing back through the industrial grid again—past the same warehouses but from different angles, different speeds, different light.

Mai didn't tell her where to turn. She didn't need to. She just watched the mirrors and the recorder and the negative spaces where patterns liked to gather.

And she wrote.

Because writing was the most insulting thing you could do to an entity that wanted mystique.

It wanted you dreamy.

Mai kept them bureaucratic.

Ace kept them alive.

The office building with the lit third-floor window stayed behind them, but Ace's mind kept dragging it forward like a hook caught in fabric.

That figure.

The way it stood—still, unhurried, like a person who didn't need to lean into the glass to see you because the glass was irrelevant.

Ace didn't say anything for several minutes. She let the city slip by. She let the van's engine noise become a blanket. She let the seam... not win, but at least not get fed.

Then Mai spoke without looking at her.

"You said you've seen him before."

Ace's jaw tightened. "Yeah."

Mai's pen didn't stop. "Where."

Ace's eyes stayed on the road. "Not 'where' like a place." A pause. "Like a... recurrence."

Mai finally looked up—just briefly, sharp. "Explain."

Ace exhaled once. "It's stupid."

Mai's tone was flat. "Say it anyway."

Ace tapped the steering wheel once with her thumb, as if punctuation helped. "Sometimes, when things get weird, I notice the same... person. Not interacting. Not helping. Just... there. Like an echo that didn't learn how to be quiet."

Mai's gaze stayed on Ace's profile, studying. "A watcher."

Ace nodded once. "Yeah."

Mai's pen resumed, but slower now. "Describe."

Ace almost laughed. It came out dry instead. "Tall-ish. Indistinct. Always in the wrong place to be meaningful, but too consistent to be random. And the worst part—"

Mai waited, still.

Ace's voice dropped. "It feels familiar. Like I've seen him in a dream and hated it."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Seam mimic?"

Ace shook her head. "No."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "How do you know?"

Ace's hands tightened on the wheel. "Because it doesn't pull. It doesn't smell like clean metal. It doesn't try to open doors in my head." She paused, then added, quieter and more annoyed at herself than anything: "It just... makes me wonder what I missed."

Mai wrote a single line and underlined it twice.

Ace glanced over. "What did you write."

Mai's tone stayed even. "Recurring observer. Non-interactive. Emotional familiarity without lure characteristics."

Ace blinked. "That's very you."

Mai's mouth twitched. "It's very useful."

Ace took a right turn that nobody would ever call necessary. "So what. We log the creepy window guy and move on."

Mai nodded once. "We log. We don't chase."

Ace's lips curved faintly. "You're learning."

Mai shot her a look. "I'm not learning. I'm applying."

Ace shrugged. "Same thing."

They drove another fifteen minutes, then another ten, then pulled into a gas station that was open but barely awake—fluorescent lights, empty parking lot, a clerk behind bulletproof glass watching late-night humans like a nature documentary.

Mai didn't want them stopping anywhere, but sometimes you stopped anyway. Not for comfort.

For disruption.

Ace killed the engine. "We're buying anything?"

Mai glanced at the clock. "We're buying randomness."

Ace's eyebrows rose. "I love when you talk like a manifesto."

Mai's lips pressed thin. "Two items. Different category. No routine."

Ace sighed theatrically. "Fine."

They went in.

The fluorescent hum inside the store was a different kind of oppressive: normal human ugliness. Overpriced snacks, stale air, the smell of rubber mats and reheated pastries.

Ace grabbed a bottle of water and—because she couldn't help herself—one of those cheap lollipops that looked like it had been invented to punish teeth.

Mai picked up a pack of AA batteries (because irony was sometimes useful) and a roll of plain duct tape.

Ace stared at the batteries. "You're taunting it."

Mai didn't blink. "I'm restocking."

Ace paid in cash, because sometimes you lived like it was 1985 on purpose.

Back in the van, Mai put the batteries and tape into her bag like she was filing evidence. Ace unwrapped the lollipop and immediately regretted it.

"It tastes like... regret," Ace muttered.

Mai glanced at her. "Stop eating things that taste like regret."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "You're not my mother."

Mai's tone was flat. "I'm your anchor. Similar job description."

Ace snorted, then sucked on the lollipop like she was chewing glass out of spite.

They pulled out and continued rotating—one more loop, one more change, then headed toward the coordinates Bright had sent for the dawn meet.

The field office was not a dramatic place.

It was a low building on the edge of a business park, with no sign, no logo, no sense of importance. The kind of place you drove past a hundred times and forgot existed. The parking lot was half empty. The lights were on. That was all.

Mai checked the sensor before they even got out. Baseline was calm.

Then she checked the recorder. The hiss was still there, but steady. No pulse.

"No sync," Mai murmured.

Ace stared at the building. "It's waiting."

Mai didn't deny it. "We're not making it easy."

They approached the door.

Keypad. Camera. The usual human obsession with permission.

Mai held up the HARD LINE brick and pinged Bright, short and clean. "On site."

Bright answered immediately. "Good. Enter. Do not use personal phones. Hand the brick to the duty officer. And Ace—"

Ace's eyes narrowed. "What."

Bright's voice went tired-sarcastic. "Don't eat anything you didn't watch get opened."

Ace glanced at the lollipop. "Too late."

Bright sighed like he'd aged another year. "Of course."

Call ended.

The door opened from inside before Mai touched the keypad.

A man in plain clothes stood there—early forties, short hair, no visible weapon but the posture of someone who didn't need to advertise. His eyes flicked over them once, taking in everything that mattered: wet clothes, bag weight, weapon harness, the way Mai's focus sat like a blade.

He didn't smile. But he also didn't make it difficult.

"Mai. Ace," he said, as if he'd practiced their names in a mirror and hated the taste.

Mai's jaw tightened. "Who are you."

"Halverson," he replied. "Duty officer. Minimal idiots, as promised."

Ace glanced at Mai. "Is he allowed to say that."

Mai's tone was flat. "He said it. So yes."

Halverson's mouth twitched—barely. "Come in. We're running analog today."

Inside, the building smelled like printer paper and disinfectant and old coffee—the honest kind of ugly. The hallways were plain. The doors were plain. Everything was engineered to be forgettable.

Mai liked it instantly.

Ace didn't.

Because forgettable places were good for hiding in... and good for being found in.

Halverson led them into a small room with a table, two chairs, and a single metal cabinet. A cheap desk lamp sat in the corner. No screens. No smart devices. Even the wall clock was analog, with hands that clicked in tiny, measurable increments.

On the table: a stack of blank forms, a pen, a cheap tape recorder, and a bowl of wrapped candies.

Ace stared at the candies like they were explosives.

Mai's mouth quirked. "Bright warned you."

Ace muttered, "I know."

Halverson set down a thick binder. "You'll do a written debrief. Then we'll listen to your audio. Then you'll sleep for ninety minutes in a room with no vents and no heaters, because apparently reality is now allergic to comfort."

Ace blinked. "I like him."

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

Ace raised a hand. "Observation."

Halverson didn't react. He pointed at the table. "Devices."

Mai placed the Faraday pouches down first, then the recorder, then the sensor. She did it with the care of someone putting down a live thing that might bite if you looked at it wrong.

Ace set her blades against the wall, wrapped and quiet. As she did, her fingers brushed the hilts—soft,

brief.

“Stay,” she murmured under her breath. “Both of you.”

Mai’s eyes flicked to her. “Did you just talk to your swords.”

Ace didn’t look up. “No.”

Mai stared. “Ace.”

Ace finally glanced at her, deadpan. “They’re my sisters. They like being informed.”

Halverson paused mid-motion, eyes narrowing slightly—not at Ace, but at the air, like he was deciding whether to pretend he hadn’t heard. He chose professionalism.

Mai’s lips pressed thin, fighting a smile and losing by a millimeter. “That’s new.”

Ace shrugged. “Tonight is full of new.”

Mai exhaled through her nose. “Fine. Inform your sisters quietly.”

Ace’s mouth quirked. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mai sat and opened her notebook. Halverson slid the binder toward her. “Start with raw data. Times, locations, sensory cues, pattern changes.”

Mai didn’t need the instruction, but she accepted it like a ritual. “We have: alley residue, flood annex seam line, archive intercom mimicry, culvert infrastructure-free door cues, van latch clicks, heater comfort channel, attempted sync.”

Halverson’s eyes remained steady. “And the tapping.”

Mai’s pen scratched. “Yes. Stabilized at 2-1, with variations when it ‘spoke’ through intercom: 1-2-1.”

Halverson pointed to the cheap tape recorder on the table. “We copy the audio first. Then we listen. No digital transfer.”

Mai nodded. “Good.”

Ace leaned back against the wall, arms folded, eyes on the room corners. She felt the seam like a concept now, not a location. Like a pressure in the idea of “inside.”

Halverson glanced at Ace. “You’re scanning.”

Ace didn’t deny it. “I’m awake.”

Halverson’s mouth twitched again. “Stay that way.”

They worked.

Mai wrote like a machine with a human heartbeat: clean, sharp, relentless. Halverson filled in the Foundation forms with block letters. Ace contributed short lines when necessary—pure sensory details, no poetry. Smell. Pressure. Timing. The way “home” felt like a template trying to become skin.

Then Halverson rewound their recorder tape and fed it into the cheap analog deck.

“Ready,” he said.

Mai nodded once.

Ace didn’t nod. She just watched.

The room filled with hiss.

Then the culvert audio—water trickle, distant traffic, their own boots. Then the faint click of an imagined lock. The wooden door sound that did not belong. The softness of an almost-human breath.

Mai’s jaw tightened. Halverson’s eyes remained steady. Ace’s spine went cold anyway, because recorded lies still hit the nervous system.

Then Mai’s whistle.

A harsh shriek.

The waveform on the analog deck jumped. The hiss stuttered. The “breath” pulse collapsed.

Halverson paused the tape and looked at Mai.

“That,” he said, “is the most disrespectful countermeasure I’ve heard in years.”

Mai’s voice was flat. “Thank you.”

Ace’s mouth twitched. “She’s offended.”

Halverson resumed the tape.

As they listened, something subtle happened—not on the tape, but in the room.

The desk lamp flickered once.

Just once.

Mai stopped writing.

Ace’s eyes narrowed.

Halverson’s hand froze on the tape deck.

The clock on the wall clicked again, a little louder than before.

Ace felt it—the old finger on the piano key—press a fraction deeper.

Mai’s voice went quiet. “Pressure.”

Ace nodded. “Yeah.”

Halverson didn’t look panicked, but his posture changed—micro-shift into readiness. “No vents. No heaters. Nothing automatic.”

Mai's eyes moved to the door.

The handle was still.

The room stayed silent.

Then, from the hallway outside—faint, distant—came a sound:

A keycard beep.

One beep.

Then another.

Then, soft and domestic and wrong in an office building:

A wooden door opening.

Ace didn't move.

Mai didn't move.

Halverson's eyes went hard. He reached under the table and clicked something unseen—an old-school mechanical latch, extra locking the room from the inside.

The hallway sound stopped.

The pressure eased a fraction.

Mai's pen scratched one line, slow and deliberate:

Field office compromised by cue generation. Not infrastructure. Proximity.

Ace stared at the door like it might try to charm her next.

She didn't turn around.

She didn't answer.

But her voice—when it came—was dry enough to be a blade.

"Okay," Ace said softly. "Now I'm offended too."

Mai glanced at her, and for a heartbeat, the humor returned—thin, sharp, necessary.

"Good," Mai said. "Stay offended."

Because fear was fuel.

Comfort was a door.

But offense—cold, clear, human offense—was refusal with teeth.

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