



Chapter 18 — Vehicle Swap

Twenty minutes is nothing, until you spend it waiting for a sound you're not allowed to answer.

Mai didn't pack like someone leaving a room.

She packed like someone erasing a footprint.

Tape off the framed print—fast, uneven, no lingering. Paper folded, not thrown. Nothing left "suggestive." No neat little memory of them for anything to study.

Ace watched her work and felt that familiar sting of admiration that she refused to turn into a comfort ritual.

"You're thorough," Ace said.

Mai didn't look up. "I'm hostile."

Ace's mouth quirked. "Same thing."

Mai closed the bag and stood still for one breath—listening with her whole body. The lot outside was quiet. No footsteps circling. No keycard beeps from imaginary readers. No taps on concrete.

Which, again, felt worse than noise.

Ace adjusted her harness, katanas riding quiet at her back like sleeping animals that could wake instantly. She didn't touch the hilts this time.

Not because she didn't want to.

Because she wouldn't let that become a pattern.

Mai reached for the HARD LINE brick, thumb hovering. Then she stopped and put it back in the bag. Timing variation. Controlled chaos. Deny it a rhythm.

Ace watched. "We're just... leaving."

Mai nodded once. "We leave."

Ace glanced at the door. "If the seam wants us to step outside, it'll open the gate for us again."

Mai's eyes went cold. "Then we don't take the gift."

They moved.

Mai cracked the building door open a fraction and paused, listening through the gap.

Nothing.

No pressure shift.

No scent.

No "warm breath" imitation trying to brush the back of the neck.

Mai opened the door fully, and they stepped out into the lot.

Gray sky, damp gravel, three vehicles parked in neat lines. The air smelled like wet concrete and distant exhaust—normal city breath.

They walked, not rushing, not hesitating. Refusing to look like prey.

Ace's gaze scanned reflections—car windows, mirrors, the thin false honesty of glossy paint.

Mai's eyes tracked angles and blind spots like she could see geometry as a language.

They reached the gate keypad.

The gate was closed.

Good.

Mai punched the code.

Beep. Mechanical clunk.

The gate did not move.

Mai's hand froze over the keypad.

Ace felt her stomach tighten. "It's not responding."

Mai tried again—different finger, different rhythm. Beep. Clunk.

Nothing.

Mai's jaw clenched. "Power?"

Ace scanned the fence line. "Or refusal."

Mai stepped back half a pace, pulled the whistle out, then stopped—caught herself. Pattern risk.

Instead, she made an ugly human sound—cleared her throat once, sharp.

The gate motor whined.

The gate slid open.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "That's... insane."

Mai didn't smile. "It responded to meaningless sound."

Ace's mouth went thin. "So it's not just the seam learning. The systems are listening."

Mai's eyes stayed hard. "Or something is using the systems as puppets."

They didn't go through.

Mai turned away from the open gate like it was a hand extended in greeting. She walked along the inside of the fence instead, toward a side pedestrian exit—an old-fashioned metal door in the chain-link with a manual latch.

Ace followed, tension humming under her skin.

Mai stopped at the pedestrian door and tested the latch.

Locked.

Good again.

She put in the manual code on the little mechanical dial lock—Foundation antique nonsense.

Click. Click. Click.

The latch released.

Mai opened it and stepped through.

Ace followed.

Behind them, the main gate stayed open, waiting.

Mai didn't look at it.

Ace didn't look at it.

They walked away from it like refusing eye contact with a drunken stranger trying to start a conversation.

Across the access road, a gray sedan was parked at an angle it didn't need—too deliberate. Next to it stood Halverson, hands in his coat pockets, posture relaxed in the way only competent people could manage.

Ace's shoulders loosened by a millimeter.

Not safe.

Just... less wrong.

Halverson's eyes flicked to the open main gate in the distance. His mouth didn't change, but something in his gaze sharpened.

"It opened," he said.

Mai didn't waste language. "Yes. Twice. Responded after meaningless sound disruption."

Halverson nodded once. "Good refusal."

Ace slid into her dry register automatically. "Do we get points?"

Halverson's eyes moved to her. "You get to remain alive. That's the only scoreboard."

Ace nodded solemnly. "Brutal."

Halverson opened the sedan's trunk. Inside: a duffel bag, a set of paper folders, a small metal case with analog equipment, and two sealed water bottles.

Ace eyed the bottles suspiciously.

Halverson noticed. "Factory sealed."

Ace didn't touch them yet. "You sound like you've been warned about my paranoia."

Halverson's mouth twitched. "Bright gave me a list."

Mai's voice was flat. "We don't drink anything offered inside a script."

Halverson nodded. "Correct. That's why the bottles are still sealed in the trunk. You can watch me open one if you want."

Ace blinked. "That's oddly considerate."

Halverson shrugged. "It's a weird morning."

Mai glanced at the sedan's interior, then at Halverson. "Different vehicle."

Halverson held up the keys. "Different vehicle. Different route. Different timing."

Ace squinted. "Different coffee?"

Halverson stared at her for a beat. "No."

Ace sighed. "Tragic."

Halverson handed Mai the keys again.

Ace opened her mouth—

Halverson pre-empted her with a flat look. "No."

Ace shut her mouth and made a small offended sound anyway.

Mai's mouth twitched, almost a smile. "Get in."

They slid into the sedan—Mai driving, Ace in the passenger seat, Halverson in the back like a man who'd decided the universe could sit down and behave if he stared at it hard enough.

The sedan smelled like nothing. No clean-metal note. No heater warmth.

Good.

They pulled out.

Mai deliberately did not take the direct route. She looped once, then twice, changed lanes without explanation, took a side street and then another, letting the city's grid become noise.

Halverson watched the mirrors. "Observer?"

Ace's jaw tightened. "We've had reflection-channel sightings. Halverson—"

Mai cut in, controlled. "He's seen it."

Ace blinked. "You already knew."

Mai's tone stayed flat. "He didn't deny it."

Halverson didn't speak for a beat. Then he said, low, careful: "I saw it once. In a stairwell window. It didn't do anything. It just... made my skin feel like it was being filed."

Ace's mouth went thin. "That's a beautiful description."

Halverson ignored that. "Different signature than the seam. No pressure shift. No scent. No cue stack. Just presence."

Mai's eyes stayed on the road. "So it watches."

Halverson replied, "So far."

Ace stared out the window at wet streets and sleepy buildings. "Great. Two problems."

Halverson's voice stayed steady. "One problem at a time."

They drove for ten minutes.

Then twenty.

Then Mai slowed at a red light.

The city around them was waking up—more cars, more pedestrians, the slow return of normal patterns.

And normal patterns were now dangerous.

The light stayed red.

Ace watched the crosswalk signal: WAIT.

It flickered once.

Then it changed.

Not to WALK.

To something else.

For half a second, the little display showed a word it should not have had.

OPEN

Ace's skin went cold.

Mai's eyes flicked to it instantly—sharp, angry. She didn't flinch, but her knuckles whitened on the wheel.

Halverson leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "What did it say."

Ace didn't repeat it out loud. She chose contempt instead.

She laughed once—short, ugly, dismissive.

Mai cleared her throat hard, like spitting a nail.

The display flickered.

Returned to WAIT.

The light turned green.

Mai drove through without hesitation.

Halverson exhaled slowly. "Good disruption."

Ace's mouth quirked, brittle. "It's trying to recruit traffic lights now."

Mai's voice was calm and lethal. "It's trying to recruit permission concepts."

Ace stared ahead. "So it doesn't need doors."

Mai didn't deny it. "It wants 'open' as a reflex."

Halverson's voice dropped. "Which means it will try voices next."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Bright warned us."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "If it uses Bright begging, we ignore. Even if it hurts."

Halverson didn't soften. "Especially if it hurts."

They drove on.

Then the sedan's radio clicked.

Nobody touched it.

It turned on by itself, volume low, static hissing like a throat clearing.

Mai's hand did not go to the knob. She kept driving.

The static shifted.

A voice formed out of it—warm, worn, too familiar.

"Mai," it said.

Mai's face went still.

Ace's stomach tightened.

Halverson's posture changed—micro-ready.

The voice continued, soft, urgent. "Mai, it's me. Don't hang up. Don't—"

Ace felt something in her chest flare—anger first, fear second, offense third. She didn't let it become panic.

Mai didn't respond.

Ace didn't respond.

Halverson didn't respond.

The voice sharpened, slipping into something almost pleading. "Ace. Please. I need you to open—"

Ace's laugh cut through it—short, rude.

Not the whistle. Not the same laugh as before. A different contempt sound, a sharp exhale like a scoff that wanted to become a snarl.

Mai followed with something uglier: she made a sudden, harsh coughing sound and then snapped her fingers once—a meaningless human noise with no script behind it.

The radio stuttered.

The voice warped—stretched, wrong.

Then vanished into static.

The radio clicked off by itself.

Silence returned.

Mai drove like nothing happened, eyes forward, breathing controlled.

Halverson spoke first, voice steady. "Good."

Mai didn't accept praise. She turned it into data. "It attempted voice channel through radio. It used Bright's timbre."

Ace swallowed once, jaw tight. "It asked for open."

Halverson nodded slowly. "Permission concept again."

Mai's hands tightened briefly, then loosened. "We don't respond. We disrupt. We vary disruption."

Ace stared out the window, heart thumping hard, then forced her voice back into her dry register because dry kept her human.

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

Mai's mouth twitched—tiny, sharp. "Good."

Halverson looked past them through the windshield, scanning reflections in passing cars.

And for half a heartbeat—just a sliver of time between one streetlight and the next—Ace saw it.

Not the seam.

Not pressure.

Not scent.

A tall indistinct figure in the reflection of a bus window as it passed on the opposite lane.

Standing inside the bus, facing them.

Still.

Watching.

It did not blink.

Ace did not turn her head. She kept her eyes forward and spoke in the flattest, calmest voice she could manage.

"Observer," Ace said.

Mai didn't ask "where." She didn't need to. Her shoulders tightened by a millimeter.

Halverson's gaze sharpened. "Confirmed?"

Ace didn't lie. "I saw it. Reflection only. Passing bus."

Halverson exhaled. "Log it. Keep moving."

Mai drove on.

Behind them, the city woke up and pretended doors were just doors and radios were just radios and crosswalk signals were just electronics.

Ahead of them, a new kind of problem was taking shape:

The seam was learning how to speak without knocking.

And the observer was learning when to be seen.

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