



Chapter 1 — The Seam You Can't Ignore

The last of the demon-ash didn't fall like ash. It fell like something embarrassed to still exist.

Ace stood in the alley behind the butcher's shop, rain threading down the brickwork, and watched the residue try to decide whether it was smoke, grit, or a lie. The neon sign over the rear door flickered between MEAT and M_AT, as if the city itself couldn't keep its spelling straight tonight.

Mai crouched near the drain, palm hovering over a ragged scorch mark that hadn't been there yesterday. Her disruptor pistol was open at the side like a patient on a table—coil exposed, runes faintly lit, the whole thing humming with that low, steady confidence it only got when she'd already solved half the problem in her head.

"You're bleeding," Mai said without looking up.

Ace glanced down at herself, as if blood was a minor scheduling conflict. A thin line had opened under her ribs where something had grazed through leather and luck. Nothing dramatic. Just a reminder.

"So are you," Ace said.

Mai's sleeve had a tear at the cuff. Under it, a shallow cut on the inside of her wrist—too clean, too straight. The kind you got when reality went sharp for a half-second.

Mai's mouth tightened. "That's not from the demon."

"No," Ace agreed.

The air still held the wrong scent: not sulfur, not rot—something clean and metallic, like a fresh battery cracked open. It sat in the lungs and refused to behave like ordinary aftermath.

Ace turned her head a fraction, listening. The alley was quiet in the usual ways: distant traffic, a door slamming somewhere, rain sliding off gutters. But underneath, there was a second layer. A faint pressure in the bones. Like a hand resting on a piano key without pressing it down.

Mai felt it too. She always did.

"Seam," she said softly.

Ace didn't ask what she meant. "It wasn't supposed to be here," she answered instead.

Mai finally looked up. Rain beaded in her silver hair and made it look darker than it was. Her eyes—silver-blue and cold when she was working—went past Ace, past the alley mouth, as if she could see the geometry behind the street.

"It wasn't supposed to be anywhere this close," Mai said.

Ace flexed her fingers inside her glove. The leather creaked. Her twin katanas sat sheathed across her back, emerald glow reduced to a patient, contained pulse. She could feel the blades like she could feel her own teeth—present even when she wasn't using them.

And inside, far under thought, something else stirred.

Not fully. Not speaking. Just... aware.

Violet didn't need to comment. The silence was the comment.

Mai snapped her disruptor closed with a neat click and stood. She didn't tower—Ace was small, a compact pressure point of a person—but Mai had that calm that made space around her behave better. Like the air didn't want to embarrass itself.

"We go," Mai said.

Ace nodded. "We go."

They moved out of the alley into the wet city, hoods up, boots finding traction on slick pavement without needing to talk about it. Streetlights made puddles look deeper than they were. A tram hissed by like a tired animal. Somewhere a drunk laughed and then stopped laughing too fast.

They didn't go back to the safehouse first. Not yet. Not until Ace had walked the route twice in her head and decided nobody had followed them in any direction that mattered.

They slipped into an underground parking structure that smelled like old oil and cold concrete. Mai chose a corner where cameras were pointed the wrong way—not broken, just misaligned enough to be useless when you wanted privacy. She set her kit down on the hood of an abandoned car, ran a

cloth over the disruptor's barrel, and finally let herself exhale.

Ace leaned against a pillar, the kind with chipped paint and an old number stenciled on it. She watched Mai's hands. Mai's hands always told the truth even when her face didn't.

"Show me," Mai said.

Ace unbuckled her harness enough to expose the cut. Mai's eyes narrowed. She didn't touch yet. She assessed first—distance, angle, pattern.

"This isn't a claw," Mai said.

"No."

"It's... sliced."

Ace's mouth twitched. "Yes."

Mai took out antiseptic and a strip of sterile sealcloth. She worked fast, not rough, but efficient in that way that said I'm angry and I'm choosing not to waste it.

"You took it late," Mai murmured.

Ace didn't lie. "I took it while watching you."

Mai paused half a second—nothing more—and continued. "Idiot."

Ace blinked slowly. "That's your love language."

Mai huffed a laugh that died before it fully lived. She pressed the sealcloth down, then taped it with two clean, precise strips. "If you do that again," she said, "I'll make you wear padding."

Ace's eyebrows lifted. "Threats already."

"It's not a threat," Mai said. "It's logistics."

Ace let her head tip back against the concrete. The cold helped. The pressure under her skin still lingered—like an itch made of geometry.

Mai packed away the med supplies. Her locket—the small silver piece she wore close to her sternum—rested against her collarbone, dull in the parking light. It wasn't glowing. It wasn't reacting.

Which somehow made Ace less comfortable, not more.

Mai looked up again. "Phone."

Ace slid hers out.

It vibrated once—then again, impatient. The screen showed a number that wasn't a number. Just a string of characters that would have looked like static if you didn't know better.

Ace answered without greeting.

"Still alive?" the voice asked.

Bright's voice. Too smooth. Too cheerful. Like a man who'd learned that sounding calm made other people panic quieter.

Ace glanced at Mai. "Yes."

"Wonderful," Bright said. "Try to keep that streak going. I'm in a meeting where three people are discussing whether the world is allowed to have corners. I'd like to interrupt their philosophy with your survival."

Mai leaned in slightly. Not to listen—she could hear him anyway—but because the sound of Bright always meant something next.

Bright continued. "You had an unregistered flare about forty minutes ago. Ugly signature. Not demon-class."

Mai's eyes sharpened. "You were watching."

"I prefer 'monitoring,'" Bright said. "It sounds less like I'm a creep."

Ace's voice stayed flat. "What do you want."

A beat. Bright's cheer softened by one notch, the rare move he made when he was actually serious.

"I want you to stop treating this like a one-off," he said. "This is not a local haunting. This is a seam problem."

Mai's gaze snapped to Ace's wound again, then back to the air as if she could see the seam itself.

Bright went on. "I'm not sending you into anything big tonight. Not yet. But I'm also not letting you go home and pretend the cut you took was bad luck."

Mai's tone was calm, but it had a blade hidden inside. "You said you're not sending us into anything big."

"I'm not," Bright said quickly. "I'm sending you into something small that tells me whether you're already being tracked."

Ace's fingers tightened once on her phone. "Test gig."

Bright laughed. "You say that like it's an insult."

"It's a category," Mai said.

"And it's a useful one," Bright replied. "Listen: I've got a maintenance annex on the edge of the city. Old flood infrastructure. Municipal people complain about 'phantom drafts' and tools going missing. Boring. On paper."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "And off paper?"

"And off paper," Bright said, "it's humming in the same wrong register you just met behind that butcher shop. Same clean-metal smell. Same pressure-wave that makes cameras misbehave. Same—" a pause, as if he didn't want to say the next word too loudly—"edge."

Ace's throat went dry. Violet stayed quiet. Too quiet.

Mai spoke first. "Location."

Bright sent it without fuss. Ace's phone pinged and displayed a map marker: a service site tucked near a water treatment boundary, fenced, forgotten, ugly.

Ace listened to her own pulse for a second, then said the only thing that mattered.

"We go."

"Of course you do," Bright said, as if he'd never doubted it. "Couple conditions."

Mai's voice turned colder. "State them."

"No heroics," Bright said. "No chasing things into tunnels because they 'feel wrong.' If you confirm the seam is active, you mark it, you log it, you leave."

Ace's mouth moved. "And if it doesn't let us leave."

Bright's cheer returned like a mask snapping back into place. "Then you improvise, and I pretend I didn't just tell you not to."

Mai snorted. Ace almost smiled.

Bright added, softer: "Also—if you hear anything that sounds like a person trying to imitate a door opening... don't answer it."

Mai's gaze flicked to Ace. "That specific?"

"It is," Bright said. "And yes, I hate that it's specific."

Ace's eyes cut to the darker corners of the garage. For a split second, the concrete felt like it leaned. Like the space itself was curious.

Then it stopped.

Mai touched Ace's wrist—light, exact. Not a stop. A punctuation.

"We do this clean," Mai said.

Ace nodded once. "We do it clean."

Bright exhaled as if he'd been holding his breath since the call began. "Good. Ping me when you're on site. And Ace?"

"What."

Bright hesitated a fraction. "If something offers you an easier angle than the one you'd normally take..."

Ace's gaze went distant for an instant, not unfocused—sharp in a different direction.

"I know," she said.

Bright didn't press. He never did when pressing would make something worse. "Goodnight, liabilities."

Mai cut the call.

For a moment, the parking garage was just a parking garage. Concrete. Damp. Smells. Normal human boredom.

Then Ace's phone buzzed again—not a call, not a message. Just a single vibration like a finger tapping glass.

Ace turned the screen over.

No notifications.

Mai noticed anyway. "That wasn't him."

"No," Ace said.

She held her breath. Not because she was afraid. Because her body was listening for the seam again.

In the far corner of the garage, a fluorescent light flickered—once, twice—then steadied.

Mai's disruptor coil gave a tiny, involuntary hum.

Ace's katanas warmed in their scabbards like they'd heard their own names whispered.

Mai lifted her chin toward the exit ramp.

"We're being invited," she said.

Ace's mouth became a thin line. "We decline," she answered.

They moved.

Not fast. Not slow. Just with the steady inevitability of people who had learned that the worst thing you can do to a breach is pretend it's not there.

Outside, rain kept falling like nothing in the world had changed.

But the seam had noticed them.

And it wasn't going to forget.

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