



Chapter 5 — The Archive Doesn't Breathe

The university district at night always looked like a place pretending to be safer than it was.

Street lamps glowed with that soft institutional optimism—here, knowledge lives; here, nothing sharp happens—and the buildings sat heavy and respectable behind iron fences. Wet stone, wet trees, wet history. Even the graffiti seemed more polite.

Ace drove slower here, not because she was cautious, but because the roads curved like the city was trying to guide you somewhere without admitting it was guiding you. Mai watched the map marker Bright sent and cross-checked it against what her eyes said the environment was doing.

“Climate-controlled manuscript archive,” Mai murmured. “Deep storage.”

Ace glanced at the buildings passing by. “So... the seam is upgrading its taste.”

Mai’s mouth twitched. “From butcher alley to medieval parchment. Yes.”

Ace nodded, solemn. “It’s cultured.”

Mai shot her a look. "Don't anthropomorphize it."

Ace blinked slowly. "You just called it 'cultured.'"

Mai stared for half a beat, then exhaled through her nose. "Fine. Don't anthropomorphize it more."

Ace's lips curved. "No promises."

They turned onto a service road that ran behind the university's older buildings. The kind of lane students didn't know existed—delivery access, maintenance-only, the spine of a place that wanted to keep its organs private.

A low concrete structure appeared in the headlights, half-sunk into the ground like a bunker that had learned manners. A single keypad, a single camera, a single metal door with a plaque:

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS — CLIMATE STORAGE AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

"Same song," Ace muttered.

Mai's gaze flicked to the camera. "Different verse."

Ace parked in a small bay marked for deliveries. The drizzle had thinned to a mist. The air smelled of wet leaves and old stone.

Mai didn't get out immediately. She looked at her recorder display: flat hiss, no taps, no spikes.

"You feel anything?" Mai asked.

Ace sat still, eyes half-lidded, the way she did when she was listening with her bones. "No pressure. Yet."

Mai nodded once. "Good. Clean environment, my—"

Her bag thumped.

Both of them froze.

Mai slowly looked down.

Inside her bag, from within the Faraday pouch, came a dull, muffled tap.

Ace's eyes sharpened. "It followed."

Mai's voice stayed calm. "Or it's attached."

The bag thumped again: tap-tap.

Then a pause.

Then one more: tap.

Mai's pen was already in her hand. She didn't remember picking it up. She wrote without looking down: 2-1.

Ace leaned closer, voice low. "It changed."

Mai nodded. "It adapts."

Ace's mouth went tight. Humor evaporated, replaced by that hard-edged focus that made her small body feel like a weapon's point.

Mai put the pen down carefully, like noise itself could be provocative. "We're not answering it," she said. "We're not reacting."

Ace lifted a brow. "I'm reacting internally. Does that count?"

Mai's gaze slid to Ace's face. "Try not to give it anything it can reuse."

Ace's jaw tightened. "Yeah."

Mai reached into her bag, pulled out the Foundation HARD LINE brick, flicked it on. "Bright."

Static. Then his voice: "You arrived?"

Mai didn't waste breath. "Taps continued on transit and on arrival. Pattern changed from 4-2-1 to 2-1. No external pressure felt yet."

Bright went quiet in that way that meant he was doing math nobody wanted to see.

"Okay," Bright said finally, and it was the same not-normal okay as earlier. "Proceed with entry. Confirm whether environment changes tapping frequency."

Ace spoke into the brick. "It's already tapping."

Bright's tone went drier. "Yes. Which means it's either riding your devices through proximity to you... or it's using your devices as a stage because it knows you'll look."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "It wants attention."

Bright's voice softened. "It wants acknowledgment."

Ace's mouth twitched, humor trying to crawl back like a stubborn weed. "We're going to ghost it."

Mai cut her eyes at Ace. "Yes."

Bright didn't laugh. "Mark any distortions. Do not go deeper than the main storage corridor. If you hear the door sound—"

Ace finished for him. "Don't answer."

"Good," Bright said. "Ping me if the pressure returns."

Mai ended the call.

They got out.

The air here really was cleaner. Not emotionally—nothing was clean emotionally anymore—but physically: less oil, less rust. The kind of place where people tried to control humidity down to a decimal point and believed it meant control in general.

Mai walked to the door first, disruptor in hand, posture steady. Ace followed half a step behind—not

because she needed protection, but because she functioned best when Mai set the line of reality and Ace enforced it.

Mai punched in the access code.

The keypad beeped.

The lock clicked.

Ace watched the door like it might try to charm her.

Mai opened it.

Cold air breathed out, immediate and precise—archive climate, dry and chilled, like a refrigerator built for paper. The smell was faint dust, old glue, and something you only got with books that had lived too long: a thin sweetness, like time itself had a scent.

Mai stepped in.

Ace stepped in.

The door shut behind them with a firm metallic thunk—not polite, not soft, just final.

The corridor was narrow and bright, fluorescent lights humming evenly. Shelving units stood behind glass panels: boxed manuscripts, labeled containers, sealed drawers. Everything here was controlled and cataloged, the way humans tried to pretend the world was.

Ace didn't like it.

Because control was a lie, and this place felt like it believed its own.

Mai paused and held her handheld sensor unit out. The green line on the screen steadied... then shivered slightly.

"A field?" Ace asked.

Mai frowned. "Not like the annex. Different."

Ace tilted her head. "Different how."

Mai's gaze stayed on the screen. "Like it's not in the room yet. Like it's... at the edge of the room."

Ace's mouth went thin. "A threshold."

Mai nodded once. "Yes."

Ace glanced at the shelving. "So, what does an archive threshold look like?"

Mai's lips tightened. "It looks like—"

A sound came down the corridor.

Not a knock.

Not a door.

A soft, delicate rustle—paper against paper.

Like a page turning.

Mai froze.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "No wind."

Mai's voice stayed quiet. "No."

The rustle came again, a little closer this time. Not loud. Not dramatic. Just intentional enough to be noticed by anyone who loved books.

Ace's fingers brushed the wrap of one katana hilt, a tiny affectionate check. "It thinks we're sentimental."

Mai shot her a look without moving her head. "Don't."

Ace whispered, "Joke."

Mai breathed out through her nose, then took one slow step forward.

The corridor ended in a small T-junction: left toward deeper storage, right toward a locked climate room. In the center of the junction, mounted high on the wall, was an intercom box with a speaker grille and a tiny red light.

The red light was off.

Mai stared at it for a full second.

Then it clicked on.

Not blinking. Not flickering. On.

A thin hiss filled the corridor—speaker waking up.

Ace felt the skin at the back of her neck go cold.

Mai lifted her disruptor slightly, not aiming at the intercom, but holding it at a ready angle like she could shoot the air itself if it misbehaved.

The speaker crackled.

And a voice came through.

Not Bright. Not human.

But trying.

"A... au-thor-ized... per-son-nel..."

Mai's eyes narrowed to slits. "It's quoting the plaque."

Ace's voice was flat. "It learned the language of permission."

The speaker hissed, then tried again, smoother this time:

“Authorized personnel... please... open... the door.”

Ace’s jaw tightened. The intercom wasn’t asking them to open this door. There wasn’t a door in front of them. It was referring to something deeper, left down the corridor, beyond the junction.

Mai didn’t answer.

Ace didn’t answer.

The speaker crackled again, and this time the voice softened—manufactured warmth layered over wrongness like cheap perfume.

“Mai...?”

Mai’s pupils contracted. She did not look away from the intercom.

Ace felt Violet go very, very still.

Not hungry-still.

Recognizing-still.

Ace’s voice came out low and clipped. “That’s not you.”

Mai’s jaw clenched once. She didn’t speak.

The intercom tried again, and now it was almost convincing: the cadence close enough to make your heart trip, the tone softened with familiar edges.

“Ace. It’s cold in here.”

Ace’s fingers tightened on the katana hilt until leather creaked.

Mai lifted her free hand—palm slightly out toward Ace without looking at her—a silent anchor. A reminder: you are here, not there.

Ace swallowed once, hard.

Mai’s voice finally cut through, calm and lethal. “Stop.”

The intercom hissed.

Then, like a child being corrected, it changed tactics.

A soft sound came over the speaker—wood creaking, hinges shifting—

The exact domestic sound of a wooden door opening.

In this cold fluorescent archive.

Ace’s stomach turned.

Mai didn’t flinch. She took one deliberate step closer to the intercom, eyes like frost.

"You don't get to use our names," Mai said quietly. "You don't get to use our sounds."

The intercom clicked.

For a heartbeat, the red light dimmed.

Then it brightened again.

And the speaker produced a new sound: a low, slow tap... tap-tap... tap—

Not from the bag. From the intercom itself.

Mai's eyes sharpened. She glanced down at her recorder, then back up.

"Listen," Mai murmured, mostly to herself.

The taps repeated:

tap — pause — tap-tap — pause — tap

Ace stared at the intercom like it was a mouth wearing human lips.

Mai's pen was in her hand again. She wrote without thinking: 1-2-1.

Ace whispered, "Is it—"

Mai answered, quiet but certain. "It's trying to establish a language."

Ace's mouth quirked, bitter humor returning like a defense reflex. "It's making friends."

Mai didn't smile. "It's making a protocol."

Ace's gaze slid down the corridor to the left—deeper storage, locked doors, thicker cold. The green line on Mai's handheld unit began to shiver more now, as if the environment itself had decided to listen.

Mai stepped back from the intercom and turned to Ace, finally meeting her eyes fully.

"Mark and leave," Mai said.

Ace nodded once. "Mark and leave."

Mai pulled the reactive particulate canister, shook it, and sprayed a fine mist across the junction—air, intercom, the seam between corridor and deeper storage.

For a moment, nothing.

Then the mist bent—subtly, elegantly—toward the left corridor like gravity had taken a breath.

Mai's eyes went colder. "Confirmed threshold pull."

Ace's jaw tightened. "It's inviting again."

Mai's voice was flat. "It's trying to train us that invitations are normal."

Ace looked at the intercom light—steady red, watching.

Then she looked back at Mai and said, almost gently for her, “You’re doing good.”

Mai blinked once, the smallest crack in her control. “Don’t.”

Ace’s mouth quirked. “Not praise. Data. You didn’t flinch.”

Mai exhaled through her nose. “I flinched internally.”

Ace nodded. “Same.”

Mai touched Ace’s wrist, the anchor gesture again. “We leave.”

Ace let her hand drift away from the katana hilt.

They turned and walked back down the corridor the way they’d come—steady, controlled, refusing to give the intercom the satisfaction of a chase.

Behind them, the intercom crackled once more.

The voice returned—too soft, too close to real.

“You... can... come... home...”

Mai did not answer.

Ace did not answer.

They reached the entry door. Mai punched the exit code. The lock clicked. Cold archive air spilled into warmer night air.

As they stepped out into the mist, Ace felt the pressure in her bones return for a breath—just a fingertip on that piano key again—then fade.

Mai shut the door behind them. The metal thunked like a period at the end of a sentence.

Outside, the streetlamps hummed, and the wet stones pretended nothing had happened.

Ace walked to the car and muttered, “That thing has terrible manners.”

Mai slid into the passenger seat, already writing. “Yes.”

Ace started the engine. “Also, it owes us an apology for using our names.”

Mai didn’t look up. “We are not negotiating etiquette with a seam.”

Ace deadpanned, pulling out of the bay, “Fine. But if it tries ‘pizza delivery,’ I’m allowed to be offended.”

Mai’s pen paused for a fraction, then resumed. “You’re always allowed to be offended.”

Ace’s mouth twitched. “Finally. Permission.”

Mai’s eyes lifted—briefly—and in them was something colder than fear and stronger than anger.

“Now we have a pattern,” Mai said quietly.

Ace kept driving, eyes forward. “And it has us.”

Mai corrected, soft and sharp: “It wants us.”

Ace nodded once. “Yeah.”

In Mai’s bag, from inside the Faraday pouch, came a single muffled tap.

Just one.

Like a wink.

Mai didn’t look at it.

Ace didn’t either.

They drove into the wet night, carrying raw data, a marked threshold, and the growing certainty that the seam wasn’t random.

It was learning them.

And it was learning fast.

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