



Chapter 6 — Call-and-Refusal

Ace didn't take the shortest route back.

She took the route that made the city work for it.

Three turns that didn't need to exist, a loop around a block with too many reflective windows, a slow crawl past a bus stop where the glass would show a tail if one existed. Every time, nothing. No second car. No pair of headlights. No suspicious pedestrian with an umbrella and a purpose.

Which should have felt good.

It didn't.

Because the thing they were dealing with didn't need a car.

Mai sat with her notebook open on her lap, writing with the kind of focus that made her look like she was doing homework instead of trying to outthink an intelligent fracture in reality.

Ace glanced over once. "You're going to wear through that pen."

Mai didn't look up. "Good."

Ace's mouth twitched. "You really are angry."

Mai's pen paused. "I'm not angry."

Ace waited.

Mai added, clipped: "I'm... offended."

Ace's eyebrows lifted. "Oh. That's worse."

Mai shot her a look so sharp it felt like a thrown blade. "It used my name."

Ace nodded once, solemn. "Yeah. That's personal."

Mai's jaw clenched, then she went back to writing as if paper could absorb contamination.

Ace drove them out of the university district and into the more anonymous grid of the city, where buildings stopped pretending to be wise and started admitting they were just storage for humans and their habits.

Then Mai's bag thumped again.

A muffled tap from the Faraday pouch.

Mai didn't look down.

Ace didn't either.

Two taps. Pause. One tap.

Mai's pen moved immediately: 2-1.

Ace exhaled. "It's consistent now."

Mai's voice stayed calm, but it had an edge. "It's testing whether we'll start anticipating."

Ace's lips curved faintly. "We are."

Mai looked up sharply. "We're logging. Not anticipating."

Ace shrugged. "Same muscles."

Mai stared. "No."

Ace held the look for a beat, then relented with a small nod. "Okay. Different muscles."

Mai's gaze dropped back to the notebook. "Good."

The safehouse appeared in the distance—ordinary buildings, dim streetlights, the same buzzing lamp that hated its job. Ace parked under it, cut the engine, and sat still for a breath.

Mai didn't move yet. "Before we go in," she said quietly. "We check for bleed."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "You think it can—"

"I don't think," Mai replied. "I assume."

Ace nodded once, because Mai's assumptions were usually built from survival.

They got out. The drizzle had stopped. The street was slick and quiet. Somewhere a cat ran across a driveway, a quick shadow that made Ace's hand twitch toward her katanas before she corrected herself.

Mai saw it. "Relax."

Ace deadpanned. "I was relaxed."

Mai's mouth twitched. "Sure."

They entered the safehouse. Mai locked the door behind them, then put her bag on the table without opening it.

Ace hung her harness, then immediately went to the window and checked the street again—not because she expected something physical, but because checking was a ritual and rituals mattered more when reality was misbehaving.

Mai laid out the devices again, this time with more intention. Recorder. Sensor. Notebook. Faraday pouches like sealed organs.

She tapped the recorder and watched the tiny waveform on its screen. "We have clear capture."

Ace turned from the window. "Bright wants the data."

Mai nodded. "We send it through HARD LINE. Not phones."

Ace held up the brick device like a dead fish. "This thing."

Mai's lips pressed tight. "Yes. This thing."

Ace flicked it on. "Bright."

Static. Then Bright's voice, sounding like he hadn't slept since 1998. "Report."

Mai spoke with clean precision. "Second site confirmed. No initial pressure. Taps continued through transit and on arrival. Intercom activated without power indicator. Entity attempted vocal mimicry—used both our names. Initiated domestic door-opening sound through speaker. Attempted tap protocol through intercom: 1-2-1. Reactive particulate indicated threshold pull down left corridor."

Bright was quiet for a second.

Then: "It used your names?"

Mai's tone went colder. "Yes."

Bright swore softly. "Okay. That's escalation."

Ace added, flat: "It offered 'home.' Again."

Bright's voice tightened. "Noted."

Mai continued. "Tapping pattern has stabilized at 2-1 during transit and post-arrival. It's consistent."

Bright exhaled. "That suggests it's trying to lock a handshake pattern. Like a repeating header."

Ace said, "So we don't respond."

Bright replied instantly. "Exactly. No response, no reciprocal pattern. You starve it."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Starving implies it's feeding."

Bright's voice was grim. "Yes."

Ace leaned her hip against the counter. "What's it feeding on?"

Bright paused.

Ace hated that pause. "Bright."

Bright finally spoke, careful. "Most likely: attention, recognition, and... internal resonance. The way your nervous systems synchronize under threat. That's why the 'home' lure. It's trying to get your bodies to relax into it."

Mai's jaw clenched. "It won't."

Bright's tone softened, almost kind. "I know you want to believe that."

Ace's eyes sharpened. "Don't."

Bright caught himself and shifted back into professional mode. "Right. Next step: you don't stay static. You rotate safe locations. And I'm assigning you a third check site—this time something that shouldn't have any intercoms, any doors, any human artifacts."

Mai's eyebrow rose. "Such as."

Bright answered, "A stormwater culvert. Open-air access. No electricity. No speakers. If it still produces 'door' cues, then it's not using infrastructure. It's using you."

A chill ran through the room despite the heater.

Mai didn't flinch. "Coordinates."

Bright sent them. The HARD LINE display pinged.

Ace read it aloud. "South-side drainage channel. Lovely."

Mai's voice was clipped. "When."

Bright didn't hesitate. "Now. Before it settles. Before it learns your safehouse rhythms."

Ace's mouth twitched. "So, it's a sprint now."

Bright's voice went dry. "It's always a sprint. You've just been lucky."

Mai reached for her bag. "We'll go."

Bright added, quickly, "One more thing."

Mai paused. "Yes."

Bright's voice dropped slightly. "If you hear something that sounds like someone you know unlocking a door behind you—do not turn around."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "That specific again."

Bright sounded tired. "Yeah. It is."

Mai's tone turned sharp. "We already didn't answer."

Bright exhaled. "Good. Keep not answering."

Call ended.

Mai looked at Ace for a beat. Then she said, quietly, "He's worried."

Ace's mouth pulled thin. "He should be."

Mai grabbed her coat. Ace grabbed hers. Their movements were efficient, practiced, not frantic.

As Mai shoved the Faraday pouches deeper into her bag, the muffled tap came again.

Two taps. Pause. One.

Mai didn't write it this time. She just stared at the bag for a breath longer than necessary.

Ace watched her. "Mai."

Mai looked up. Her eyes were cold-focus, but there was a hairline crack under it—something human, something angry.

"It's not just learning," Mai said softly. "It's trying to move in."

Ace nodded once. "Yeah."

Mai's mouth tightened. "And it's using the most pathetic trick."

Ace's eyebrows lifted. "Which one."

Mai's voice was flat. "Familiarity."

Ace snorted. "That's not pathetic."

Mai met her eyes. "It is when it's fake."

Ace held her gaze, then nodded slowly. "Okay. Fake familiarity is pathetic."

Mai exhaled. A fraction of the tension bled out. "Thank you."

Ace opened the door. Night air rolled in, colder now. The street looked the same as it always did.

But the feeling of being watched was not at the street level anymore.

It was inside their pace.

Inside their timing.

Mai locked the door behind them, and Ace heard—just faintly, just at the edge of hearing—something like a key turning in a lock somewhere.

Not here.

Not real.

A suggestion.

Ace didn't look back.

Mai didn't either.

They got into the car and drove toward the culvert, toward a place with no doors and no intercoms and no excuses.

And if the seam still tried to open something there...

Then the problem wasn't infrastructure.

It was proximity.

It was them.

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