



Chapter 7 — No Doors, Still Knocking

The south-side drainage channel wasn't a place anyone visited on purpose.

It was a scar cut through the city's underside—concrete slopes, slick algae, broken bottles caught in mud like little failed warnings. The street above hummed with distant traffic, but down here the sound changed, flattened, turned into a constant dull rush as water moved where it was told to move.

Ace parked under an overpass where the lights didn't quite reach. The headlights painted the culvert mouth in a harsh cone: a round black opening with a thin stream running out of it, like the city's throat.

Mai didn't get out immediately. She looked at the dashboard clock, then at her recorder.

Ace watched the rear-view mirror, because if the seam had learned anything, it had learned that humans relax when they stop checking.

"Open-air," Mai murmured. "No intercom. No power."

Ace nodded. "No polite domestic door sounds."

Mai gave her a look. "Don't tempt fate."

Ace's mouth quirked. "I'm not tempting. I'm mocking."

"Mocking is a kind of tempting."

Ace shrugged. "Then I'm a multi-talented liability."

Mai opened her mouth, probably to produce a clean insult that doubled as affection—
—and her bag thumped.

A soft, muffled tap from within the Faraday pouch.

Two taps. Pause. One.

Mai stared at it. Didn't write. Just stared.

Ace's tone went dry. "It's punctual."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "It's persistent."

Ace got out first. The air down here smelled like wet concrete and old leaves and the faint chemical tang of runoff. The kind of smell that made your nose forget what "clean" meant.

Mai followed, coat collar up, disruptor in hand. She moved like she belonged in a place where nothing belonged.

Ace slung her harness tighter and unshouldered one katana enough that the hilt sat ready, not flashy. The blade's green pulse stayed low, contained, like a heartbeat under a bandage.

Mai eyed it. "You're not going to swing at shadows."

Ace blinked. "Rude."

Mai's mouth twitched. "Accurate."

They walked down the slope into the channel. Their boots found traction on damp grit and mossy concrete. Above them, the underside of the overpass dripped steadily, each drop sounding like a tiny metronome.

Mai stopped at a flat patch of concrete beside the water and set her bag down. She opened it, pulled out the Faraday pouches, and placed them on the ground like cautious offerings.

Then she stepped back.

Ace watched. "You're staging them."

Mai's eyes stayed on the pouches. "If it's using infrastructure, it should stop here. If it's using us, it won't care."

Ace's mouth tightened. "So this is a test where we hope it fails."

Mai met her eyes. "Yes."

Ace nodded. "Okay."

Mai pulled the handheld sensor unit out and switched it on. The green line steadied with normal baseline noise, then wavered slightly as if the air itself had exhaled.

Mai's voice was calm, but thin. "Baseline is... wrong."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Wrong how?"

Mai tilted the sensor toward the culvert mouth. The line spiked.

Then she tilted it away, toward open channel. It lowered again.

Mai's jaw clenched. "It's concentrated at the mouth."

Ace stared at the black opening. "It's waiting."

Mai didn't correct her language this time. Maybe because waiting fit too well.

Ace took a slow breath and then did something she almost never did on instinct: she looked at Mai instead of the threat.

"You want me closer to it?" Ace asked.

Mai's eyes softened for half a second—just a hairline crack of human concern—then hardened again. "I want you where you can feel it without... feeding it."

Ace's mouth quirked. "So: be myself, but less."

Mai almost smiled. "Yes."

Ace nodded once, then stepped toward the culvert mouth with controlled, deliberate pace. Not predatory. Not fearful. Like she was approaching a line on the floor someone insisted didn't exist.

Mai stayed back, sensor in hand, disruptor lowered but ready. She didn't anchor by touching this time. She anchored by being a fixed point in Ace's peripheral vision.

Ace stopped about five meters from the opening.

The air changed.

Not temperature. Not smell.

Density.

Like the space in front of her had decided to become slightly thicker, slightly more interested.

Ace's skin prickled.

Inside her, Violet went perfectly, unnervingly still.

Mai's voice reached her, steady. "Pressure?"

Ace didn't take her eyes off the opening. "Yeah."

Mai's tone sharpened. "Rate it."

Ace exhaled slowly through her nose. "One finger on the piano key."

Mai nodded and wrote. Ace couldn't see the page, but she could hear the pen scratch.

Ace waited for the next thing.

The city obliged.

A sound came from behind her.

Not from the culvert.

Behind.

A soft metallic click—like a car door unlocking.

Ace's entire nervous system tried to pivot. The instinct was immediate, brutal: turn, check, confirm, control.

Mai's voice cut through like a blade. "Ace. Don't."

Ace froze in place. Not because she was obedient, but because Mai's tone carried the same force as a grip on the wrist.

The click came again.

Then, slower: the sound of a key turning in a lock.

A key she could almost picture.

Ace's throat went tight.

Because her brain supplied the rest automatically: a hallway. Warm light. A door that belonged to something familiar.

It wasn't hers. It was template. Generic. But that was the point. The seam didn't need accuracy. It needed traction.

Mai spoke again, quieter, lethal. "Eyes forward."

Ace forced herself to keep looking at the culvert mouth.

The water trickled out like saliva.

Behind her, the "door" sound progressed with careful, domestic patience: hinge creak, gentle opening, the subtle pressure-release of a space becoming "available."

Ace's fingers tightened on her katana hilt until the leather wrap creaked.

Mai didn't move. She didn't rush to Ace. She didn't shout. She held her ground and let her voice do the anchoring.

“That isn’t real,” Mai said. “It’s a hook.”

Ace’s voice came out low, clipped. “I know.”

The “door” finished opening.

Then a soft exhale.

Human.

Warm.

Close enough that Ace’s skin believed it.

Mai’s sensor unit spiked hard for half a second, then steadied.

Mai’s pen scratched faster. “It’s generating the cue without infrastructure.”

Ace felt her jaw tighten. “So it’s using us.”

Mai didn’t sugarcoat it. “Yes.”

A pause.

Then, from somewhere—maybe behind, maybe in her own skull—came a careful, almost gentle sound:

A step.

One footfall, perfectly ordinary.

Like someone walking toward her on a carpeted floor.

Ace’s pulse thumped in her ears. Violet remained still, but it was a different stillness now—like a predator holding position in tall grass.

Mai’s voice softened just enough to matter. “Ace. Breathe.”

Ace inhaled once. Slow.

Exhaled.

Again.

The footfall came again.

A second step.

Closer.

Mai’s disruptor rose a few degrees. Not aimed behind Ace—Mai wouldn’t give the sound the satisfaction of a target—but ready to fire into any actual shape that tried to manifest from the lie.

Ace forced her voice back into its dry register, the one that kept her human. “If I turn around, do I get extra points?”

Mai didn't laugh. But her eyes flicked up, and her tone—barely—caught the humor like a hand catching a falling cup. "If you turn around, you get a concussion from me."

Ace's mouth twitched. "Love you too."

Mai's lips pressed thin. "Focus."

Another step.

Closer.

Ace's skin crawled. The sound was wrong because it was right. It matched the way humans moved. It matched the way safe approached.

Mai's pen stopped scratching.

Ace heard the quietest thing: Mai's fingers tapping once on the disruptor's casing.

Not a pattern. Not a message.

A human habit.

A reminder.

Ace swallowed hard. "Okay. Raw data: it's getting better."

Mai's voice was sharp. "Don't compliment it."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "It's not a compliment. It's an insult."

Mai's mouth twitched despite herself. "Good."

The footsteps stopped.

A breath behind her—closer than before—seemed to lean in.

And then, quietly, the seam tried something new.

Not words.

Not names.

A sound that was almost nothing: a soft fabric rustle, like someone adjusting a coat sleeve.

A sound so small it bypassed rational thought and went straight to familiarity.

Ace's spine went cold.

Because that tiny rustle sounded like Mai's jacket when Mai moved beside her in tight spaces.

Not exact.

Close enough.

Mai's eyes narrowed, reading Ace's micro-reaction. "What."

Ace kept her gaze pinned forward. "It's mimicking you now. Not your voice. Your... presence."

Mai's expression hardened into something that didn't belong on a human face—cold, controlled fury. "No."

She stepped forward, not toward the sound behind Ace, but closer to Ace herself. She came to stand just off Ace's left shoulder—solid, real, breathing.

Then she spoke, not loud, not theatrical. Just clear.

"You don't get her," Mai said.

Ace felt something in her chest loosen by a millimeter.

Mai continued, voice calm enough to make it violent. "You don't get me either. You get nothing."

The air in front of the culvert mouth thickened, like it had been offended.

The sensor unit in Mai's hand spiked again.

And from the Faraday pouch on the ground, a muffled thump answered—two taps, pause, one—like it was still trying to run its little protocol.

Mai looked down at the pouch for the first time in minutes, eyes like ice.

Then she did something very Mai.

She reached into her pocket, pulled out a strip of Foundation red tape, and slapped it across the pouch like she was sealing a box.

Ace blinked. "Is that... psychological warfare?"

Mai didn't look up. "It's documentation."

Ace's lips curved. "You just taped it like it's misbehaving."

Mai's tone was flat. "It is misbehaving."

Ace let out a small, breathy laugh—one sharp note of humanity in a place that wanted to turn them into responsive animals.

The sound behind them—the fake door, the fake footsteps—hesitated.

Like it didn't know what to do with laughter.

Mai's eyes flicked to Ace. "Good."

Ace's brow lifted. "Good?"

Mai's jaw tightened. "It wants fear or comfort. Laughter is neither. Keep it."

Ace nodded slowly. "Okay."

Mai raised the sensor again toward the culvert mouth. The line wavered, then steadied at a high baseline.

Mai exhaled. "Confirmed: no infrastructure needed."

Ace stared into the black opening. "So it's close."

Mai's voice went quieter. "Close enough to listen."

Ace's hand settled on the katana hilt. "And to knock."

Mai nodded once. "Yes."

They didn't approach further. They didn't chase. They didn't "push the boundary" for the thrill of it. Bright had asked them to confirm.

They had.

Mai reached for the particulate canister and sprayed a fine mist near the culvert mouth.

The mist didn't just bend.

It streamed—thin tendrils drawn toward the darkness like the air was being inhaled.

Mai's eyes went hard. "That's not a line. That's a pull."

Ace's voice came out low. "It wants in."

Mai corrected, almost clinically. "It wants access."

Ace finally let herself glance sideways at Mai. "Same thing, with better manners."

Mai's mouth twitched, grim. "Yes."

Mai tapped the HARD LINE brick and spoke without preamble. "Bright. Culvert test confirmed. It generated door/lock/footstep cues with zero infrastructure. Pressure present. Particulate shows active pull. Tapping continues concurrently."

Bright's voice answered immediately, tight. "Understood. Leave the area. Now."

Ace didn't argue. She turned away from the culvert mouth like she was turning her back on a rude stranger at a party.

Mai gathered the pouches, the recorder, the sensor, movements quick but controlled.

As they climbed the slope toward the car, Ace heard the faintest thing behind them:

A soft click.

Like a door being shut again.

Not angry.

Not loud.

Just... patient.

Mai didn't look back.

Ace didn't either.

They got into the car. Ace started the engine. The headlights swept across the channel one last time, catching wet concrete and trickling water and nothing else.

Mai watched the recorder waveform.

It was noisy now. Not taps. Not spikes.

A low, consistent hiss that wasn't in the environment.

It was in the recording.

Mai's voice went quiet. "It's imprinting."

Ace's hands tightened on the wheel. "So what now."

Mai looked at her, and the humor was gone—not because she couldn't handle it, but because this part demanded clarity.

"Now," Mai said, "we stop calling these test gigs."

Ace exhaled once. "Yeah."

Mai's eyes stayed on hers. "Now we treat it like a campaign."

Ace nodded slowly, then let her mouth quirk just enough to keep the human thread alive.

"Okay," Ace said. "Campaign. Do I get a badge."

Mai's lips twitched—tiny, sharp. "You already have two swords. Don't be greedy."

Ace pulled the car up onto the road and drove into the night, leaving the culvert behind.

But the feeling of a door being opened—somewhere behind them, somewhere inside the seam—followed in the spaces between their breaths.

Not chasing.

Just keeping pace.

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Last update: **17/03/2026 18:03**

