



Chapter 8 — Rotation

The city looked different when you stopped believing in “safe.”

Not scarier. Not darker. Just... less honest. Like you’d discovered the wallpaper was hiding a crack and now every patterned surface felt complicit.

Ace drove with the heater on too high. Not because she was cold—Ace ran hot when her body thought it might need to sprint—but because warmth made “home” harder to fake. Cold was easy. Cold belonged to basements and archives and culverts. Warmth was something you had to maintain.

Mai watched the recorder waveform like it was a heart monitor.

It was still noisy.

Not environmental noise. Not engine vibration. Something else—thin, consistent, almost like a carrier signal.

Ace noticed her stare. “If it gives you a headache, stop looking at it.”

Mai didn't blink. "If I stop looking at it, it wins."

Ace's mouth twitched. "That's very you."

Mai finally glanced at her, expression flat. "And you're very you. Which is why you're driving like the road personally offended you."

Ace took a corner a little sharper than necessary. "It did."

Mai sighed, but there was a faint edge of amusement under it—the kind that only showed up when the fear hadn't fully eaten the room.

They passed their safehouse turnoff.

Mai's gaze flicked there, a reflex. Then forward again. "Bright said rotate."

Ace nodded. "We rotate."

Mai's pen scratched in her notebook. "We rotate now."

Ace glanced at her. "I'm aware."

Mai's tone sharpened. "I'm making sure your body is aware."

Ace deadpanned. "My body is aware. It's my patience that's struggling."

Mai's lips pressed thin. "Good. Let patience suffer. Survival first."

Ace didn't argue. When Mai sounded like that—calm, controlled, cold-focus—arguing would be like arguing with gravity.

The HARD LINE brick sat on the console between them, its tiny LED steady. Ace tapped it. "Bright."

Static, then his voice—immediate, clipped. "Location?"

Mai answered before Ace could. "On the move. Culvert test confirmed. Door cues without infrastructure. Pressure and pull active. Recording shows imprint hiss."

Bright's exhale sounded like someone grinding their teeth through a laugh. "Okay. Good work."

Ace narrowed her eyes. "That's a weird compliment."

"It's a compliment because you're alive," Bright replied. "Next instruction: you do not go back to your safehouse. You're burned."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Burned meaning..."

Bright didn't sugarcoat it. "Meaning your rhythm is known. Your door. Your locks. Your timing. The seam is trying to train itself on your domestic loops."

Ace's hands tightened on the wheel. "So it learns our habits like a dog."

Bright's tone went darker. "Like a parasite."

Mai's eyes hardened. "Where do we go."

Bright sent coordinates. The brick pinged, and a simple monochrome map marker appeared.

Mai read it aloud. "Storage facility. Industrial zone."

Ace blinked. "That sounds romantic."

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

Bright's voice slid back into dry sarcasm like a man grabbing a familiar coat. "Yeah, I'm sorry, I didn't have 'candlelit penthouse' available at two in the morning. It's a Foundation-owned unit. Clean. Empty. Shielded."

Ace muttered, "Allegedly."

Bright ignored it. "You'll find a gray van inside. Keys in the glovebox. Use it for the next twelve hours. Do not return to any place you've slept in the last week."

Mai's pen scratched. "Twelve hours."

Bright continued. "And—this matters—you keep your devices sealed. No phones. HARD LINE only. If you absolutely must speak to anyone, you speak to me."

Ace's tone went dry. "We were going to call the seam and ask it to stop."

Bright laughed once, thin. "Don't tempt me. It might answer."

Mai's eyes flicked to Ace. "He's not joking."

Ace's mouth quirked. "I know."

Bright's voice sharpened. "One more thing. If you hear the door cue in the van—"

Mai answered automatically. "We don't answer."

Bright exhaled like he'd been holding his breath since the archive. "Good."

Call ended.

For a while they drove in silence, broken only by the hiss of wet tires and the low hum of the recorder that refused to behave like a normal object.

Ace took them through the city's industrial spine: warehouses, shuttered businesses, chain-link fences, sodium lamps that painted everything the color of old bruises.

At one intersection, a pedestrian crossing signal blinked WAIT even though no one was there. The letters flickered once, then steadied.

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

Mai didn't look away from the road. "Ignore it."

Ace snorted. "I am ignoring it. Aggressively."

Mai's mouth twitched. "Your aggression is very loud."

Ace glanced at her. "Says the woman who taped a Faraday pouch like it was misbehaving."

Mai's gaze slid to her for a split second, ice-calm. "It was misbehaving."

Ace's lips curved. "I love you."

Mai stared forward. "Yes."

A beat.

Ace waited, eyebrows rising.

Mai added, clipped, as if it pained her to say it out loud: "I love you too."

Ace's smile flashed, small and sharp, like a green edge under cloth. "There it is."

Mai exhaled through her nose, but the corners of her mouth softened. "Don't make it a thing."

Ace's tone was almost gentle. "It's always a thing."

Mai didn't answer, but her hand drifted for half a second toward Ace's wrist—stopped short, then returned to her lap. Anchor gestures weren't always physical. Sometimes they were the decision not to touch because touch could become a cue the seam tried to steal.

They arrived at the storage facility around 03:02.

A big rectangle of asphalt and corrugated metal, fenced, lit by harsh floodlights. The gate keypad accepted Bright's code without complaint. The place smelled like cold metal and dust and the faint chemical tang of industrial cleaners.

Unit 14B was at the far end, away from the office, away from cameras that pointed too cleanly. A padlock hung there, new and bright.

Mai stopped and stared at it.

Ace looked at her. "What."

Mai's voice was quiet. "It's new."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "You think it's staged."

Mai didn't blink. "Everything is staged now."

Ace stepped forward and did her lock trick again—quiet, surgical violence. The shackle popped, and the roll-up door groaned upward.

Inside: darkness. Then the floodlight spill revealed a gray van parked neatly within, exactly as promised. No clutter. No boxes. No human mess.

That cleanliness was suspicious all by itself.

Mai stepped in first, sensor in hand. The green line steadied.

"No pressure," Mai murmured. "Baseline clean."

Ace followed, eyes scanning corners as if the air itself could hide behind them. “So far.”

Mai reached the van, opened the driver’s door, and leaned in to check the glovebox. Keys—metal, old-fashioned, heavy. She held them up like a prize from a terrible carnival.

Ace exhaled. “We live in the van now.”

Mai’s mouth tightened. “We live in the van for twelve hours.”

Ace looked at her. “You’re going to hate this.”

Mai’s eyes stayed cold-focus, but her tone softened a hair. “I hate it less than being trained by a seam.”

Ace nodded once. “Fair.”

Mai shut the glovebox and climbed into the passenger seat to check the interior. Clean. Too clean. No blankets, no wrappers, no signs anyone had ever sat here and been bored.

Ace stepped into the van and sat in the driver’s seat. Her body fit oddly—small enough that the seatbelt sat wrong, like the van wasn’t designed for someone her height. She adjusted it anyway, because she refused to be inconvenienced by upholstery.

Mai watched her struggle for half a second, then muttered, “Do you want help.”

Ace looked at her. “Are you offering.”

Mai’s mouth twitched. “No. I’m documenting incompetence.”

Ace deadpanned. “You’re cruel.”

Mai didn’t deny it. “Yes.”

Ace finally got the belt to behave and started the engine. The van woke with a low growl and a heater that smelled faintly of old dust.

Mai set the recorder on the center console and watched the waveform.

It flattened a little.

Not clean. But quieter.

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “The hiss reduced.”

Ace’s gaze sharpened. “Meaning.”

Mai spoke carefully. “Meaning this location might be cleaner. Or it means it’s adjusting.”

Ace gripped the wheel harder. “I hate both options.”

Mai leaned back and closed her eyes for a single second—not sleep, just recalibration.

“Bright wants twelve hours,” Mai said. “We do twelve hours. We don’t give it routines. We don’t give it doors.”

Ace looked at the roll-up door behind them. "We are literally inside a door."

Mai opened her eyes slowly. "Not a domestic one."

Ace's mouth quirked. "So the seam has taste. It likes wooden doors."

Mai's eyes flicked to her, warning.

Ace lifted a hand. "I know. Not anthropomorphizing."

Mai nodded. "Good."

They drove the van out of the unit, rolled the door down behind them, and re-locked it. Mai did the locking this time, deliberately, as if refusing to let Ace's lock-breaking become a repeated cue.

Ace guided the van out of the facility and into the industrial grid beyond, choosing side streets and empty lanes where they could park without being visible from too many angles.

They found a spot under a bridge—not the culvert bridge, a different one—where the streetlight above buzzed and the concrete pillars made the world feel segmented into manageable pieces.

Ace killed the engine.

For a moment, there was only the sound of cooling metal and distant city hum.

Mai spoke softly, without looking at Ace. "We need a plan."

Ace nodded. "We have one. Don't answer. Log everything. Rotate."

Mai's gaze shifted to her. "That's a procedure. Not a plan."

Ace held her eyes. "Okay. What's the plan."

Mai opened her notebook again, pen poised. "We assume it can generate cues without infrastructure. We assume it's attempting a handshake protocol. We assume it's learning the emotional shortcuts in our nervous systems."

Ace's jaw tightened. "Home. Names. Door sounds."

Mai nodded. "Yes. So we counter with the opposite: unfamiliarity. Noise. Randomness."

Ace blinked. "You want to become chaotic."

Mai's eyes narrowed slightly. "Controlled chaos."

Ace's mouth quirked. "I can do chaos."

Mai shot her a look. "I said controlled."

Ace made a small sound of reluctant agreement. "Fine."

Mai tapped her pen against the paper. "No consistent sleep location. No consistent meal timing. No consistent entry rituals. We vary our routes. We swap who locks things. We change our language patterns."

Ace lifted a brow. “We stop saying ‘we don’t answer.’”

Mai’s lips tightened. “We stop giving it repeated phrases.”

Ace stared at her, then nodded slowly. “Okay. That’s smart.”

Mai’s gaze softened a fraction—approval, but cautious. “And we keep humor. But we keep it... human.”

Ace frowned. “What does that mean.”

Mai looked directly at her now. “It means we laugh at it, not at ourselves. We don’t use the same joke twice. We don’t create a script.”

Ace’s mouth twitched. “So no pizza joke again.”

Mai’s lips pressed thin. “Correct.”

Ace sighed theatrically. “Tragic.”

Mai’s eyes flicked briefly to the back of the van, then to the side mirrors, then back to Ace—tactical scanning disguised as normal movement.

“Also,” Mai added, quieter, “if it tries to mimic me again—”

Ace cut in, flat and certain. “I won’t follow it.”

Mai held her gaze. “I know. I’m still saying it out loud.”

Ace nodded once. “Okay.”

For a breath, the van felt like a small island in a city that didn’t understand what was happening beneath its streetlights.

Then the recorder hiss rose slightly.

Mai’s eyes snapped to the waveform.

Ace’s gaze followed.

The line on the display wasn’t just noise now. It had a pulse.

Not taps. Not knocks.

A slow swell and release, like breath.

Mai’s voice went very quiet. “It’s not tapping.”

Ace leaned closer. “Then what is it doing.”

Mai swallowed once. “It’s... syncing.”

Ace felt her skin go cold.

Because the van’s heater had just kicked on.

And the warm air that flowed from the vents—steady, domestic, almost comfortable—carried a scent that did not belong to old dust.

A clean metallic note.

Like a battery cracked open.

Ace's fingers tightened around the steering wheel until her knuckles paled.

Mai didn't move. She didn't panic. She did the only thing that mattered.

She reached out and placed her hand—firm, real—on Ace's wrist.

Anchor. Human. Present.

Ace's breath hitched once, then steadied.

Mai spoke softly, right into the space between them. "It's trying a new door."

Ace's voice was low, almost a growl. "The heater."

Mai nodded. "Warmth. Comfort. 'Home' without saying the word."

Ace stared forward at the wet street beyond the windshield. "So now even heat is compromised."

Mai's mouth tightened. "Not compromised. Contested."

Ace's lips curved faintly, sharp. "You and your language."

Mai's eyes stayed on the waveform. "It's making a protocol."

Ace's voice went flat again, the dangerous calm returning. "Then we break it."

Mai met her eyes. "Yes."

The recorder line pulsed once more, slow as breath.

And somewhere—no intercom, no electricity, no wooden door—something between the city's seams seemed to listen to the sound of two people refusing to be turned into an invitation.

Not angry.

Not loud.

Just patient.

Learning.

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