

## Chapter 9: Containment Without Contact

Rogue didn't answer the first call.

That meant she was already listening.

Mai didn't try again.

She set the terminal on the table, not opening the file, not pulling the logs back up. Just placing it there like an object that didn't need interpretation anymore.

Ace watched her do it.

Not the device.

The choice.

Shammy leaned against the wall near the door, one hand resting lightly against the frame. The air had settled again, but not fully. There was still a faint unevenness to it—like the room hadn't decided yet whether to trust what had just happened.

"Say it," Ace said.

Mai didn't look at her.

"It doesn't persist."

Ace nodded once.

"Good."

Mai shook her head slightly.

"No. That's not good."

"Why."

Mai turned then, finally.

"Because it means containment isn't physical."

That changed the direction immediately.

Ace's posture shifted—not tense, but focused.

"Explain."

Mai stepped closer to the table, resting her fingertips against the edge.

"You can't lock it down. You can't isolate it. You can't destroy it." A pause. "Because it isn't there unless someone is trying to complete it."

Shammy's voice came quietly.

“Then containment is behavior.”

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

Ace let out a slow breath.

“Then we don’t contain it.”

Mai’s eyes flicked to her.

“We do if we want it to stop mattering.”

Ace’s gaze held.

“It already stopped mattering. You proved that.”

Mai didn’t respond immediately.

Because that—

wasn’t entirely true.

“...it stops existing,” she said. “That’s different.”

Ace didn’t argue the distinction.

Didn’t need to.

“What do you tell Rogue,” she asked.

Mai looked at the terminal.

Didn’t touch it.

“Not the truth.”

That got a reaction.

Not sharp.

Just immediate.

Ace’s head tilted slightly.

“Try again.”

Mai exhaled.

“The full truth isn’t actionable,” she said. “If I tell her what it is, she’ll send someone else in to confirm it. Or worse—someone who thinks they can handle it.”

“That’s on her,” Ace said.

“No,” Mai replied. “That’s on us.”

Silence.

Shammy’s fingers tapped once against the doorframe, a soft, controlled rhythm.

“What version *is* actionable,” she asked.

Mai’s gaze shifted slightly, not unfocused—structured.

“Partial hazard classification,” she said. “Non-hostile architecture. Cognitive risk. Prolonged exposure leads to operational degradation.”

Ace frowned.

“That sounds like you’re downplaying it.”

“I am.”

“Why.”

Mai met her eyes.

“Because if I make it sound unique, it becomes a challenge.”

That landed.

Hard.

Ace didn’t argue.

Because she knew exactly how that worked.

Shammy’s voice came softer now.

“You’re trying to make it... boring.”

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

A beat.

Then Ace:

“That might be the smartest thing you’ve said all day.”

Mai didn’t smile.

“That’s not comforting.”

“It’s not supposed to be.”

The terminal pinged once.

Incoming line.

Rogue.

Mai let it sit for a second.

Then opened it.

Rogue's face didn't appear.

Of course it didn't.

Just voice.

"Tell me you didn't break anything expensive."

Mai's reply came immediately.

"Non-hostile structure. No active defense. No containment breach risk."

A pause on the other end.

Too short to be real.

"Yeah," Rogue said. "You're lying."

Mai didn't react.

"I'm prioritizing operational outcome."

"That's a fancy way of saying you're deciding what I get to know."

"Yes."

Silence.

Then a quiet exhale.

Rogue wasn't angry.

That would have been easier.

"You going to explain why," she asked.

Mai's gaze flicked briefly to Ace.

Then back to the terminal.

"It doesn't persist," she said. "It requires engagement to exist."

Another pause.

Longer this time.

"...that's not how systems work," Rogue said.

“No,” Mai replied. “It isn’t.”

Ace crossed her arms, watching the exchange without interrupting.

Shammy’s gaze stayed on Mai, tracking micro-shifts—breathing, tone, the subtle ways pressure moved through the room.

Rogue spoke again.

“Define engagement.”

Mai didn’t hesitate.

“Attempted completion.”

That—

cut through.

Clean.

On the other end of the line, something shifted.

Not audibly.

But there.

“Say that again,” Rogue said.

Mai didn’t.

Because she didn’t need to.

Silence stretched.

Then:

“...and the runners,” Rogue said.

Mai’s voice stayed level.

“They didn’t disconnect because they thought they were close.”

Another pause.

“...close to what.”

Mai’s answer came slower now.

“Finishing something that doesn’t need to be finished.”

That one stayed.

Rogue didn’t respond immediately.

Didn't push.

Didn't dismiss it.

Just... processed.

Finally:

"So the fix is what," she asked.

Mai's gaze dropped to the terminal surface.

Empty.

Inactive.

"Don't engage it."

"That's not a fix."

"It's the only one that works."

A quiet sound from Rogue's end.

Not frustration.

Something sharper.

"People don't do that," she said.

"I know."

"That's the whole problem."

"Yes."

Ace shifted slightly, weight redistributing.

"She's right," she said, cutting in for the first time. "You send another runner in, they stay."

Rogue didn't respond to Ace directly.

But the silence acknowledged it.

"...and you didn't," Rogue said.

Not a question.

A check.

Mai answered it anyway.

"No."

Another pause.

Then:

"...send me everything you've got," Rogue said. "I'll classify it as a cognitive hazard and bury it under three layers of 'not worth your time.'"

Mai nodded once.

"Good."

"But," Rogue added, voice sharpening slightly, "if I find out you held something back that gets someone killed—"

"You won't," Mai said.

Flat.

Certain.

Rogue let that sit.

Then:

"...yeah," she said quietly. "You sound like you mean that."

The line cut.

No goodbye.

No confirmation.

Just done.

Mai closed the terminal without looking at it again.

The room felt different.

Not lighter.

Just... resolved.

Ace pushed off the wall.

"That it."

Mai nodded.

"Yes."

Shammy stepped away from the doorframe, moving closer to them.

"The air's steady again," she said.

Mai exhaled slowly.

"Because we're not interacting with it."

Ace tilted her head slightly.

“Because you’re not.”

A small difference.

Important.

Mai didn’t argue.

“...yes.”

Silence settled.

But this time—

it didn’t carry weight.

It didn’t hold tension.

It just... existed.

Like the system had stopped mattering the moment they chose not to complete it.

Shammy’s voice came softer now.

“What happens next.”

Ace answered immediately.

“We don’t go back.”

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

But something in her expression—

still held that edge.

That almost.

Shammy saw it.

Of course she did.

“You’re still thinking about it,” she said.

Mai didn’t deny it.

“...yes.”

Ace stepped closer.

“Stop.”

Mai looked at her.

“That’s not how this works.”

“It is now.”

A beat.

Then:

“You don’t solve everything,” Ace said. “Some things you leave alone.”

Mai held her gaze.

“And if leaving it alone isn’t enough.”

Ace didn’t hesitate.

“Then we deal with it when it isn’t.”

That—

was the line.

Simple.

Brutal.

True.

Mai exhaled.

Not satisfied.

Not resolved.

But—

aligned.

“For now,” she said.

Ace nodded once.

“For now.”

Shammy’s hand rested briefly against Mai’s shoulder.

Not anchoring.

Not restraining.

Just—

present.

And for the first time since they'd found it—

Mai didn't think about the system.

Not even for a second.

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