

## Chapter 2: Debrief Is a Cage

The debrief room was designed to make people talk.

White walls. No seams. No visible corners. The light was tuned just slightly too warm—calibrated to lower resistance, to soften edges. A room that promised safety while quietly measuring how much you needed.

Ace sat perfectly still in the chair across the table.

Mai stood.

Not out of defiance, but geometry. She leaned against the wall at a shallow angle, arms loosely crossed, eyes unfocused in a way that suggested relaxation but wasn't. She was mapping exits that weren't there. She always did.

The man across from them smiled with his mouth and nothing else.

"Thank you for agreeing to this follow-up," he said. "Given Jakarta, and now this—event—it's important we establish continuity."

Ace said nothing.

The man waited the socially appropriate half-second too long, then shifted his attention to Mai.

"You may sit, if you like."

Mai smiled back, thin and polite. "I'm fine."

The man nodded, making a note that wasn't written down.

On the table between them lay a thin folder. No markings. No logos. Just paper heavy enough to imply consequence.

"Let's start simple," he said. "You reported anomalous precipitation."

Ace's gaze slid to the folder.

"Not precipitation," Mai corrected calmly. "Behavioral inversion."

The man's pen paused midair.

"Rain doesn't behave," he said gently.

Mai tilted her head. "Neither do people. Yet here we are."

A microsecond of tension passed. The smile tightened, recalibrated.

"Fine," he said. "Describe what you experienced."

Ace felt the familiar pressure at the base of her skull—the sensation that came when words wanted to betray shape. She chose carefully.

"It noticed us," she said.

The man's eyes lit up. "Excellent. Noticed how?"

Mai straightened slightly. "That's not an excellent question."

The pen stopped again.

"You're here to help us understand," the man said.

"No," Mai replied. "We're here to prevent you from misunderstanding."

Silence followed. Not the oppressive kind. The evaluative kind.

Ace's shadow pooled tighter beneath her chair, responding to something it didn't like. She kept her breathing slow. Measured.

"We're missing a month," the man continued, changing tack. "After Jakarta. Communications blackout. No field reports. No telemetry."

Ace met his eyes for the first time.

"You weren't missing us," she said. "You were letting us run."

The man didn't deny it.

"Observation requires distance."

"So does containment," Mai said.

The folder slid open by itself—not moving, just revealing. Inside were photographs. Blurred street footage. Thermal maps. A still frame of the alley where the rain had risen.

And the mark.

Ace felt it before she saw it. That phantom-scar sensation again, crawling across her ribs. The trisected circle stared up from the page, imperfectly captured, its lines slightly wrong—as if the camera had flinched.

Mai inhaled sharply.

"That image is unstable," she said. "You shouldn't have printed it."

The man shrugged. "It's just ink."

The lights flickered.

Once.

Ace's eyes darkened, violet deepening as something behind them pressed closer to the surface. Not Violet—not yet—but the echo of a deeper pressure, a resonance that recognized proximity.

The man cleared his throat. "This symbol appears in multiple archives. Different cultures. Different centuries. Always associated with—"

"Quarantine," Mai said.

The word landed like a dropped instrument.

The man's smile vanished.

"Who told you that term?" he asked.

Mai didn't answer.

Ace leaned forward, elbows resting on the table. The movement was small, but it shifted the room. Her presence compressed space the way deep water compresses lungs.

"You're treating this like an object," Ace said. "It isn't."

The man swallowed. "We treat everything like an object. It's how we survive."

Ace's gaze flicked to the mark on the paper.

"No," she said quietly. "It's how you lose names."

The temperature dropped half a degree.

Mai pushed off the wall and stepped closer to Ace—not touching, but within reach. Anchor distance.

"If you catalog this wrong," she said evenly, "it will adapt to your methods. It already learned from ours."

The man blinked. "Learned what?"

Mai met his eyes without blinking.

"That we move."

Another flicker of the lights. This time longer.

From somewhere deep in the building, an alarm considered sounding—then didn't.

Ace felt it then. Not in the room, not in the walls.

In the gap between questions.

Something had been listening again.

She stood.

The chair didn't scrape. It didn't make a sound at all.

"We're leaving," she said. No command. Just a fact.

The man rose halfway out of his seat. "You can't just—"

Mai cut him off. "You invited us for answers. You got a warning."

Ace turned toward the door.

Behind her, the mark on the paper bled slightly at the edges—not red nor black, just less defined, as if

the lines were reconsidering their shape.

Ace didn't look back.

As they walked down the corridor, the lights stabilized. The building exhaled.

Mai waited until the door sealed behind them before speaking.

"They were ready to name it," she said.

Ace nodded once. "And it was ready to accept."

They moved faster now—not running, but no longer lingering. Somewhere far below, in a system that did not care about walls or protocols, something updated its file.

Not data.

Narrative.

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