

# Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

## Ace 4: Under Silent Pressure — Chapter 3 - The Wrong Enemy

**Story:** Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 4.3 **Wordcount:** ~2085 **Characters:** Ace, Mai **Location:** Warehouse **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

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### Chapter 3: The Wrong Enemy

The next assignment looked like a mercy.

That was how the Foundation sold it, anyway—small, contained, “low-risk exposure,” a clean little box of a problem after yesterday’s polished weirdness. Mai read the briefing twice and still didn’t like it.

Not because it was dangerous.

Because it was simple.

Simple things were where the Foundation hid hooks.

They took a standard elevator down into a standard sublevel. Concrete. Painted lines on the floor. Fluorescent light that made everyone’s skin look slightly unwell. A security tech at the checkpoint scanned their IDs without making eye contact.

Routine.

Almost.

Ace walked beside Mai with her hands in her jacket pockets, shoulders loose in a way that meant nothing. The katanas were cased and carried, not displayed. She didn’t swing her gaze to corners today.

She stared straight ahead.

That was worse.

“You’re quiet,” Mai said.

Ace’s eyes flicked toward her. “You counted me last time.”

Mai’s mouth twitched. “I’m not counting. I’m observing.”

“Same sin, different outfit,” Ace said.

Mai didn’t argue. She let them keep walking.

The containment room wasn’t a dramatic chamber with blast doors and warning strobes. It was a converted storage bay with a glass wall, a few sensors bolted up like afterthoughts, and a tech team that looked bored in the specific way of people who had been told to treat something strange as a maintenance issue.

Inside the bay sat the “fragment.”

It wasn't a creature. It wasn't an object in the usual sense, either.

It was... a presence.

A dark, dense patch of air near the back wall, like someone had painted over reality with a brush that didn't fully load. It didn't move. It didn't pulse. It didn't do the usual fragment thing of making the room feel crowded with impossible intent.

It just sat there, quiet and wrong.

A junior researcher—too young to have that calm—held a tablet and pointed without looking directly at it. “It formed around 03:10. No aggression. No expansion. No response to sound. Thermal signature stable. It just—exists.”

Mai nodded once. “Any interaction attempts.”

“Light probe, no response. EM sweep, no response. Acoustic, no response. We've kept it under observation.” The researcher hesitated, then added, “It hasn't tried to breach.”

Mai glanced at Ace.

Ace's jaw was set.

Not fear. Not curiosity.

Tension.

“What do you feel,” Mai asked, quietly.

Ace didn't answer right away. Her gaze stayed on the patch of darkness like it was an insult.

“Nothing,” Ace said finally.

Mai didn't like that word coming from her.

“Nothing is not a neutral result,” Mai said.

Ace's mouth tightened. “It's just sitting there.”

“That's what they said about the warehouse object,” Mai replied.

Ace's eyes sharpened. “That one was polite.”

“This one is... what,” Mai asked, keeping her tone flat, boring, the way you speak when you want a room to stop listening for emotion.

Ace stared. “It's pretending.”

Mai felt her own muscles tighten, just a little. “Pretending to be passive.”

Ace nodded once. A sharp movement. “Yes.”

Mai took a slow breath and stepped closer to the glass wall, keeping her shoulders loose and her hands visible. She didn't like being in front of Ace when Ace got that look, but she liked the alternative even less: Ace moving first.

"Open the bay," Mai told the tech team.

The senior technician blinked. "Agent Mai, protocol says—"

Mai didn't raise her voice. She didn't need to. "Open it. I'm authorizing contact. Minimal exposure. Two minutes."

The technician hesitated just long enough to show he was going to comply either way. He keyed the lock and a thin line of red on the wall turned green.

A door clicked.

Air shifted.

Mai stepped inside.

The room smelled like dust and stale coolant. The fragment sat against the far wall, unchanged. It didn't flare. It didn't react. If anything, it looked almost... tired.

Mai stopped at the marked line on the floor. "Ace stays behind me."

Ace's voice was quiet. "I'm behind you."

Mai didn't turn. She trusted that statement only because she could feel Ace's presence like a second heartbeat.

Mai raised her hand slightly, palm open. Not touching it. Not challenging it. A gesture humans used when they wanted to show they weren't holding a weapon.

It felt ridiculous.

It felt necessary.

The fragment didn't move.

Mai waited.

Nothing.

She took another step forward—careful, deliberate, the way you approached a wild animal you didn't want to startle.

Still nothing.

Mai exhaled. "Okay," she murmured, more to herself than anyone. "It's not reacting."

Ace's needle—Mai could hear the faint mechanical tick of it from behind her—shifted.

Not a spike.

A tremor.

Mai stopped immediately.

“Ace,” she said, low. “What.”

Ace didn’t answer. Her breath had changed. Shorter. Tighter. Like her body had decided there was something here worth bracing for.

Mai held still. She didn’t step back yet. Retreat could be interpreted as threat.

The fragment remained unchanged.

Ace’s voice came out thin. “It’s... wrong.”

Mai kept her eyes on the patch of darkness. “Describe.”

Ace swallowed. “It’s not empty.”

Mai’s fingers flexed once, then relaxed. “Okay.”

Ace’s needle ticked again, louder this time.

Mai didn’t like the rhythm. It wasn’t panic. It was recognition, the way her own system reacted when she heard a sound she’d learned to fear before she learned its name.

Mai took one step back, slow.

“Ace,” she said, still boring, “we can stop.”

Ace didn’t stop.

She moved.

It happened in half a second—Ace sliding past Mai with a speed that didn’t belong in a room this small. The cases were already off her shoulder before Mai fully registered the movement. The katanas came out with that soft, lethal hiss of metal leaving sheath, and the air in the bay changed shape.

Not because the fragment attacked.

Because Ace did.

“ACE—” Mai snapped, voice finally breaking boring.

Ace struck.

The first cut wasn’t toward the fragment. It was around it—an arc through the air, as if she was trying to sever something invisible that connected it to the room. The blade’s green glow painted the walls in brief, sickly flashes. The second cut followed immediately, crossing the first.

The fragment did not lash out.

It did not lunge.

It did not defend itself.

It... receded.

Not like a creature backing away, but like a stain being wiped.

Ace's needle spiked sharply—then stayed high.

Mai stepped forward, arm out, not grabbing the blade, just touching Ace's forearm near the needle—anchor contact, the way she'd learned to do it without triggering fight reflex.

"Ace. Eyes here," Mai said, low and hard.

Ace's gaze snapped to her for a fraction of a second.

That fraction mattered.

Mai kept her hand steady. "It's not attacking."

Ace's voice came out like a growl. "It's lying."

Mai turned her head slightly, eyes still on Ace. "Then we leave. We don't do this in here."

Ace's jaw worked. The needle held high. Her blades remained up.

And then—finally—Ace looked back at the fragment.

The patch of darkness had become thinner. Not gone. But diminished. Like whatever it had been doing, it had stopped doing.

Ace stepped forward again.

Mai's stomach dropped.

The third strike came down—too heavy, too fast, aimed directly at the fragment's core.

The blade met the floor instead.

Concrete exploded.

A crack spiderwebbed across the bay. A piece of shelving near the wall rattled, then toppled as the vibration hit it. A sensor pole bent with a sharp metal scream. The glass wall shuddered; someone outside cursed and stepped back instinctively.

The fragment flinched—not violently, not offensively—just... pulled inward another centimeter, as if the physical damage had been louder than any threat.

Mai's pulse hit her throat.

"Ace!" Mai barked.

Ace froze mid-breath.

The needle trembled.

Mai shoved her voice back into boring, into structure. "Stop. Now."

Ace's shoulders rose, then fell. Like she'd been holding a pose for a camera and someone had finally turned the light off.

The fragment continued to sit there, smaller now, quiet and wrong and—Mai hated this thought—almost injured.

Mai's jaw clenched hard enough her teeth hurt.

Ace's voice came out tight. "It was going to—"

"It wasn't," Mai said, immediately, because she needed the fact to land like a slap. "It didn't."

Ace stared at her. The brightness in her eyes was still there, but it had shifted—less predator, more person waking up too fast.

Mai kept her hand on Ace's forearm. "Sheath them."

Ace hesitated.

Mai didn't argue. She didn't plead. She waited.

Ace slowly lowered the blades.

The green light bled off the walls.

When Ace slid them back into their cases, the room seemed to exhale.

Outside the bay, the tech team stared through the glass like they were looking at a hurricane that had decided to be human for ten seconds.

Mai turned toward the door. "We're done."

The senior tech opened his mouth, then shut it again. He stepped aside as if he didn't want his body on record in the path of whatever this was.

They walked out.

Mai didn't look back at the fragment.

She didn't want to see whether it had watched them leave.

In the corridor outside, the mundane hum of the site returned—footsteps, ventilation, distant voices. It should've been grounding.

It wasn't.

Ace walked beside Mai, quiet now in the way she'd been quiet before the bay—straight-ahead, jaw set, eyes too bright.

Mai didn't speak until they were two turns away from the containment area and there were other people nearby. Witness. Always witness.

Then Mai stopped at a wall-mounted console and pulled up the internal incident form.

Ace's eyes flicked to it. "You're filing."

Mai's fingers moved. "Yes."

Ace's voice tightened. "About the damage."

Mai didn't look at her. "About the response."

Ace went still.

Mai typed slowly, deliberately, each word chosen like it might become a weapon later.

OPERATOR RESPONSE OUTSIDE PROPORTION TO THREAT INDICATORS. ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE: UNNECESSARY. ANOMALY BEHAVIOR: NON-AGGRESSIVE / RETRACTIVE.

She paused over the next word.

She didn't want to use it.

It felt like betrayal. It felt like the kind of language the Foundation used to reduce people into problems.

But if she didn't name it, someone else would—later, with worse intent.

Mai typed:

OVERREACTION.

Ace's head turned sharply. "Mai."

Mai finally looked up.

Ace's eyes were fixed on her, bright and raw. "Don't write that."

Mai's voice stayed low. Not cruel. Not soft. Honest. "If I don't, they will."

Ace's mouth opened, closed. The needle on her forearm wavered, then steadied. Contained.

Mai saved the report.

The confirmation ping sounded like a nail being tapped into a wall.

Ace stared at her for a long second. Then she looked away.

"You think I'm breaking," Ace said, voice flat.

Mai shook her head once. "No."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Then why."

Mai's answer came fast, because it had been sitting in her chest since the warehouse.

"Because something is leaning on your choices," Mai said. "And today it got you to swing at the wrong enemy."

Ace's jaw clenched.

Mai didn't push further. She didn't dissect it here, in a corridor, under cameras, with people passing. She wasn't stupid.

She started walking again.

Ace followed.

They moved like they always did—two shapes in Foundation hallways, familiar enough to be ignored, dangerous enough to be left alone.

But the air behind them felt... altered.

Not haunted.

Not watched, exactly.

More like the world had taken note of the way Ace reacted.

More like whatever had been "quiet" was now curious.

Mai kept her pace steady.

Ace matched it perfectly.

Neither of them spoke again until they reached the elevator.

And as the doors slid shut, Mai caught Ace's reflection in the brushed metal: a young woman holding too much pressure under too clean a surface.

Mai's voice was soft, almost casual, like she was asking about weather.

"Did it pull," she asked, "before you struck."

Ace didn't answer immediately.

The elevator hummed downward.

Then, quietly—so quietly it could've been missed if Mai hadn't been listening with her whole body—Ace said:

"Yes."

Mai looked straight ahead.

"Okay," she said, boring and calm, because that was how you survived. "Then we log that too."

Ace's reflection didn't move.

The needle stayed steady.

But the silence between them was no longer empty.

It had weight.

Sano vain "Chapter 4." niin jatkan seuraavaan: the conversation that doesn't happen (hiljainen jälkipuinti, Mai yrittää avata, Ace sulkee - ei vihalla vaan väsyneellä ehdottomuudella).

## Response: ACT II — THE PRESSURE BUILDS —

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