

Chapter 1: Back to Routine

The van smelled like disinfectant, old fabric, and the faint metallic aftertaste of an anomaly that had been “cleaned” too quickly.

Mai noticed smells before she noticed feelings. It was one of her quiet advantages: the body registers what the mind tries to file away. She sat in the passenger seat with her tablet on her lap, the screen dimmed, the report template open and untouched.

Ace sat behind her, sideways on the bench like gravity was optional. One boot was planted on the floor, the other tucked up under her, and her katanas lay in their cases across her knees—not cradled, not hugged, just... present. A choice. A boundary.

Outside, the world was late-afternoon gray. Industrial fences. Damp pavement. A line of pines that looked like they’d been painted on in a hurry.

Mai watched the side mirror and the rhythm of the road. The driver didn’t talk. Foundation transport was built for silence: thick walls, no radio, no small talk to leave behind.

Ace’s pulse needle—an analog strip mounted against her forearm, old tech for a reason—had stayed steady since they left the site.

Steady didn’t mean calm. It meant contained.

Mai didn’t turn around. She didn’t make it a conversation yet. She let the road do its job.

The mission had been simple on paper: an object that “ate” heat signatures until the room looked empty to sensors. It had been sitting in a closed warehouse like a little black hole for infrared, turning the place into a false blank.

No screaming. No bodies. No cult graffiti. No surprise hostiles.

Neutralize. Retrieve. Seal.

Clean.

Too clean.

“Your face is doing the thing,” Ace said from behind her, voice light and dry.

Mai blinked. “Which thing?”

“The one where you pretend you’re bored.” Ace shifted slightly; the cases on her lap didn’t rattle. “But you’re counting something.”

Mai kept her eyes forward. “I’m counting the number of times you’ve spoken in the last ten minutes.”

Ace’s tone warmed with faint amusement. “And.”

“Three.”

Ace inhaled as if offended. “That’s not even excessive.”

Mai’s mouth twitched. “It’s alarming.”

“Okay,” Ace said, unbothered. “Then I’ll make it four.”

Mai let that sit. The van drifted through a slow curve. Trees slid sideways. Somewhere far off, a freight train gave a single low horn like a tired animal.

The quiet inside the van held for a while, but it wasn’t the peaceful kind. It was the kind that still had shape. Like a room after an argument, when the furniture hasn’t moved but the air knows it should.

Mai’s tablet remained open. The cursor blinked in the empty “summary” field like a pulse.

She should write the report. She should do the bureaucratic ritual: categorize, quantify, seal it in language that the Foundation could digest.

But her hand didn’t move.

Instead, she replayed the last five minutes of the operation—the part that didn’t belong in the report.

They’d reached the warehouse. Dust on everything. A grid of steel shelves. The object at the center on a pallet like it had been waiting politely. A perfect circle of cold where all the heat should’ve been.

Ace had stopped short. Not dramatically. Just a half step, like her body had hit an invisible line.

Mai had looked at her. “What.”

Ace’s eyes had been too bright. Not fear. Not excitement. Something else—like recognition without context.

“It’s... quiet,” Ace had said.

Mai had frowned. “It’s supposed to be quiet. That’s the anomaly.”

Ace shook her head once. “Not that.”

Mai had tried to ask again, but then they’d moved. Procedure. Hands. Gloves. Instruments. The routine of making the impossible behave.

The object had complied.

Which was a problem in itself.

Mai had seen plenty of anomalies that fought. Plenty that bled reality. Plenty that tried to bite.

This one had been passive. Almost helpful. Like it wanted to be taken.

Ace had neutralized the residual effect with two short, efficient strikes—not at the object, but at the air around it, as if cutting the seam the thing had stitched into the room. The ripple had collapsed. The cold circle had filled in. Heat returned.

Clean.

Too clean.

Mai stared at the road and felt her teeth press together.

When they arrived at their apartment complex, the van didn’t stop at the curb. It pulled into the

subterranean parking bay that belonged to the Foundation's "leased units." The door opened with a hydraulic sigh.

Mai stepped out first. The air down there smelled like concrete and damp tires. Her shoes clicked. She hated that sound. It always felt like announcing herself to a building that already knew.

Ace hopped down after her, light on her feet, cases slung over one shoulder. She didn't look tired. She never looked tired in the normal way.

But Mai noticed something else: Ace's gaze kept flicking—not to threats, not to exits, but to angles. Corners. Empty spaces where something might have been.

Mai keyed the door and they went in.

Upstairs, the apartment greeted them with its usual modest discipline: gray walls, functional furniture, a kitchen that had never known joy but did its job anyway.

Mai set her tablet down on the table and exhaled through her nose.

Ace stood in the center of the living room for a beat, still in her boots, still with the cases on her shoulder, like she hadn't decided whether being "home" was real yet.

"You can put them down," Mai said.

Ace's eyes flicked to her. "I know."

Mai waited. She didn't repeat herself.

Ace took a step toward the wall and set the cases down carefully, leaning them where they wouldn't fall. Not hidden. Not displayed. Just... there. She did it like a person laying a weapon down without believing the war was over.

Mai watched her do it and didn't comment.

She poured water into the kettle. The click of the switch sounded too loud.

Ace wandered to the window and stood with her hands in her jacket pockets, looking out at the city the way some people looked out at the ocean—like it might swallow them if they stared too long.

Mai leaned against the counter. "Any injuries?"

Ace's head tilted slightly. "No."

"Any stress response worth noting."

Ace paused. That fraction of hesitation was the only honest answer Mai would ever get from her without force.

"No," Ace said again, a beat later.

Mai didn't argue. She didn't push. She wasn't stupid.

The kettle began to warm. The apartment filled with the soft, metallic hum of it.

Mai broke the silence first, but gently—like touching a bruise.

“Back there,” she said. “In the warehouse. You stopped.”

Ace didn’t turn. “I didn’t stop.”

“You did.”

Ace sighed quietly, like her body was annoyed at being observed. “It was nothing.”

Mai kept her voice neutral. Boring. The same tone she used for inventory checks and supply requests. “What was it?”

Ace’s shoulders lifted a millimeter. “The room felt... staged.”

Mai’s brow furrowed despite herself. “Staged.”

“Like someone cleaned it,” Ace said. “Not the dust. The... shape.” She finally turned her head, only halfway. “It was too easy.”

Mai stared at her. That was exactly the phrase her own mind had been refusing to say.

“You mean the anomaly cooperated,” Mai said.

Ace’s mouth tightened. “Yes.”

“Some anomalies cooperate,” Mai said, because facts were safer than intuition.

Ace’s eyes sharpened. “This one wasn’t... lazy. It was polite.”

Mai’s throat went a little dry. She didn’t like the word polite in this context. Polite suggested intent. Polite suggested social awareness. Polite suggested a thing that understood being taken and chose not to object.

Mai looked down at her tablet on the table. The cursor blinked patiently.

What do you write in a report when the problem is not what happened, but how smooth it was?

She tried anyway. Her fingers tapped a few words into the summary field:

OBJECT RECOVERED WITHOUT INCIDENT.

She deleted it immediately. The sentence felt like a lie because it was technically true.

Ace watched her. “You’re going to write ‘no incident’ and then drink tea and pretend you’re fine.”

Mai’s lips parted slightly. “That was going to be the plan, yes.”

Ace’s expression shifted—almost a smile, but not quite. “Bad plan.”

Mai turned the kettle off and poured water into two cups. The steam rose like a small, temporary ghost.

“Everything’s a bad plan,” Mai said. “We just choose the least stupid one.”

Ace moved closer, slow, unthreatening. She sat at the table without being told, elbows on the surface, chin slightly lifted as if inviting the world to try something.

Mai set a cup in front of her.

Ace's fingers hovered over it but didn't touch it yet. "You're thinking something."

Mai sat across from her. "You're thinking something."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "That's not fair."

Mai took a sip. The tea tasted like heat and nothing.

Ace watched her like she watched doors.

Mai put the cup down carefully. "The operation ended too cleanly. The readings dropped too neatly. The object behaved like it wanted to go into a box."

Ace nodded once. "Yes."

Mai took her tablet and pulled up the sensor logs. The time stamps were tidy. The graph looked like a textbook example of "successful containment."

That, too, felt wrong.

Mai scrolled slowly. "When you cut it," she said, "there was a flicker."

Ace's gaze sharpened. "I felt it."

Mai looked up. "Describe it."

Ace's jaw worked once, like she was deciding which words she hated least. "Like... pressure on choice."

Mai held still. "Meaning."

Ace leaned forward slightly. Her voice dropped. "Like the room wanted me to do a different move."

Mai didn't blink. She didn't let herself react. She made it a fact, because facts were the only things that held under pressure.

"You resisted," Mai said.

Ace's eyes flicked away, then back. "Yes."

Mai's hand tightened around the tablet. "And you didn't tell me."

Ace's expression hardened, but not in anger. In stubbornness. "You were busy."

Mai let out a small breath. "Ace."

Ace's gaze held. "It was one second."

"One second is enough," Mai said, flat. "One second is how people die."

Ace's eyes flashed, sharp and bright. "I didn't die."

Mai's voice didn't rise. It didn't soften either. "I won't let you 'not die' your way through this."

Silence.

It was heavy, but it wasn't hostile. It was the kind of silence that meant both of them had stepped near a line and were waiting to see who would blink first.

Ace blinked first. Not like surrender. Like recalibration.

"Fine," she said. "It pulled."

Mai didn't push for more. She let the admission sit on the table between them like a tool.

Outside the window, the sky was already dimming. The city lights began to glow in that artificial, tired way that made everything look like it was built to last longer than it should.

Mai picked up her pen—not to fill in the Foundation report, but to write in her own notebook. A separate one. Not official. Not shared.

She wrote a single word, slow and hard:

pressure

Ace watched the pen move. "What's that."

"A problem," Mai said.

Ace's mouth twitched. "We're good at those."

Mai looked up, and for a moment she let herself see Ace as she was: not a weapon, not an asset, not a miracle.

A person who had been forced into too many roles too early, carrying them all like blades.

Mai didn't smile. Not fully. But her eyes softened by a fraction.

"Yeah," she said. "We are."

Ace leaned back in her chair, and for the first time since they'd returned, her shoulders dropped a millimeter. Not relaxation. Just... a temporary pause in vigilance.

The tablet chimed once.

Not a schedule reminder. Not a routine ping.

Something else. Two notes close together—the tone that made your pulse adjust on reflex.

Mai didn't move immediately. She stared at the screen like she could make it disappear through contempt alone.

Ace's head tilted. "That's not normal."

Mai opened it.

MESSAGE — INTERNAL / OVERSIGHT POST-OP REVIEW ADVANCED TIME: 08:15 LOCATION: SITE-███ / CONFERENCE 3 ATTENDEE REQUESTED: M. ███ (Mai) + A. ███ (Ace) NOTE: Bring full sensor logs.

Mai stared at the word advanced until it stopped being a word and became a shape.

Ace's voice was quiet. "Earlier."

Mai didn't look up. "Yes."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Why."

Mai took a sip of tea and tasted nothing.

Outside, the night pressed its face against the window.

And somewhere far away, in a place that no map would admit, something that had died too cleanly left no trace—except the memory of how easy it had been.

Mai set the cup down.

"Because," she said, and her voice stayed calm, because calm was a weapon too, "someone wants to talk to us before we have time to think."

Ace's gaze held hers, steady and dangerous in its clarity.

Mai didn't flinch.

"Then," Ace said softly, "we think faster."

Mai's mouth twitched. "No," she corrected. "We think boringly."

Ace blinked. "That's worse."

Mai stood up and closed the tablet without replying. She went to the sink and rinsed her cup like it mattered.

It did. Small rituals mattered. They were anchors.

"We're not late," Mai said. "We're not early. We're on time."

Ace rose, rolling her shoulders once. "And we bring the logs."

"Yes."

Ace's eyes flicked to the katanas by the wall.

Mai followed the glance and shook her head once, barely perceptible.

"Not a blade day," Mai said.

Ace's mouth tightened in displeasure, but she didn't argue. "Then what."

Mai looked at her, and her tone sharpened—not with fear, but with intent.

"Procedure," she said. "And witnesses."

Ace's eyes brightened—focused, dangerous hope.

Mai grabbed her coat.

"Let's go," she said.

And as they stepped out into the corridor, Mai felt it again: that faint draft, that pressure on choice.

The impulse to turn left.

Ace's pulse needle twitched—then steadied.

Mai didn't even pause.

She looked straight ahead and said softly, for Ace and herself and whatever was listening:

"No private rooms."

Then she turned right on purpose.

And for just a second, the pressure in the air felt like something grinding its teeth. —

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