

Chapter 2: Quiet Signs

The Foundation loved corridors.

Corridors were where you could move people without making a scene. Where you could steer with signage, cameras, and polite distance. Where you could isolate someone without ever touching them.

Mai walked fast, but not fast enough to look like fear.

Ace matched her stride like she'd been built for it—half a step behind, not as protection but as presence. The pulse needle on Ace's forearm sat in its narrow band, steady in a way that would've reassured anyone who didn't know her. Mai didn't read the needle like a comfort metric.

She read it like weather.

"Conference 3," Ace said quietly.

"Yes."

Ace's gaze flicked to a junction ahead. "Left."

Mai felt it too—a faint preference in the air, a subtle tug on decision. The kind of suggestion that arrived dressed as instinct.

She didn't react. She didn't even slow. She lifted her chin and spoke in that bored, administrative tone she used when she wanted the universe to understand that it was not interesting.

"We're taking the long way," Mai said.

Ace's mouth twitched. "Because you like cardio."

"Because I like cameras," Mai corrected.

They turned right.

The pressure eased, just slightly, like a hand losing friction on glass.

Ace's eyes sharpened. "It didn't like that."

Mai didn't answer. She just kept walking, route selection deliberate: main corridor, staffed checkpoints, the tiny humiliations of bureaucracy that doubled as witnesses. A guard nodded at them. A tech pushed a cart past. A pair of junior researchers moved aside with that quick, trained politeness that meant they'd been taught not to block anyone who looked like they belonged to the dangerous category.

Conference 3 sat behind a glass wall and a badge reader. Not private. Not truly public either. The classic Foundation compromise: visible enough to claim transparency, controlled enough to be weaponized.

Mai keyed them in.

Inside: a table, four chairs, a carafe of water that looked like it had never been used. Two wall screens. A camera dome in the corner, obvious and silent.

Mai approved.

Not because she trusted the camera.

Because the camera could be mentioned later.

They waited three minutes.

Then the door opened and a man stepped in with a tablet tucked under his arm like it was a shield. He was neither security nor science—he had the posture of someone who lived in the administrative layer where consequences were handled with forms.

“Agent Mai. Agent Ace.” His smile was clean. Too clean. “Thank you for coming on short notice.”

Mai didn’t stand. She didn’t offer her hand. She made him adjust to her pace from the first second.

“Your message said ‘advanced’,” Mai said. “What changed.”

The man blinked once. He hadn’t expected that to be the first sentence. “Nothing changed. It’s simply—”

“A schedule change is a change,” Mai said, still calm, still boring. “What triggered it.”

His smile tightened, then recovered. “Routine review flagged the event as... notable.”

Ace’s gaze fixed on him like a pin. “Notable.”

The man looked at Ace and—very briefly—his eyes did the thing people’s eyes did when they realized a person in front of them could end them if the room’s rules stopped holding.

He re-centered. “A minor discrepancy.”

Mai angled her tablet toward herself, not sharing, not hiding. “Define.”

He cleared his throat. “Your sensor logs show a drop in signature that was... unusually neat.”

Mai didn’t move. “Yes.”

“And Agent Ace’s physiological readings spiked,” he continued, tapping his tablet. “Then stabilized immediately.”

Mai waited. The silence stretched just long enough to make him fill it.

“We’d like to ask a few questions,” he finished.

Mai nodded once. “Ask.”

He sat, finally, choosing the chair across from Mai. Not beside. Not next to Ace. His body language was careful in a way that wasn’t respectful—it was tactical.

“Agent Ace,” he began.

Mai cut in. “Address me.”

The man’s head turned slightly, caught. “Pardon?”

Mai's voice didn't change. "If you want to talk to her, you talk to me first. She's here. She can answer. But you address me."

Ace's mouth twitched as if she might laugh, but her eyes stayed sharp.

The man's smile returned—thinner now. "Understood. Agent Mai—did Agent Ace report any subjective impressions during the operation."

Mai didn't blink. "No."

Ace's needle twitched—barely.

Mai saw it anyway.

"And did you observe anything outside expected parameters," the man pressed, still polite, still pushing, "that might suggest cognitive influence or anomalous suggestion."

Mai leaned back in her chair, posture relaxing into something that looked almost lazy.

This was the shape of it. Not the question. The angle.

He wasn't asking about the object.

He was asking about what the object did to them.

Mai smiled faintly, a professional little curve that held no warmth. "You're asking if we were compromised."

"I'm asking if there's risk," he corrected. "The Foundation takes risk seriously."

Mai nodded. "Then do it seriously. Put your request in writing. Scope, authority, purpose. Who you report to. What you intend to do with our answers. And who else receives a copy."

The man stared at her for half a beat. "That's not necessary."

Mai's smile didn't move. "Then it's not necessary."

Ace's voice came in, calm and sharp. "Boring warfare."

The man looked at Ace again. His smile slipped for a second.

Mai watched him decide.

He chose the safer route. He cleared his throat and shifted the tablet slightly, as if rearranging his power.

"Very well," he said. "Let's keep it simple. The object was compliant. That is unusual. We want to ensure there is no pattern."

Mai nodded once, allowing that portion to exist. "That's sensible."

His eyes narrowed—he didn't like being agreed with. Agreement stole leverage.

"Good," he said quickly. "Then you'll submit full logs and remain available for follow-up."

Mai's tone stayed neutral. "We already submitted full logs."

"Yes, but we'd like them again," he said, and the sentence landed wrong. Too casual. Too entitled.

Ace's needle ticked up. Not a spike—just a rise.

Mai didn't glance at it. She watched Ace's face instead.

Ace's eyes had that brightness again. Not fear. Not anger. Recognition.

The man noticed nothing. He kept talking, too smooth. "Additionally, we may recommend a short stand-down period for Agent Ace."

Mai's hand stopped moving. Her voice went flat. "No."

The man blinked. "Agent Mai—"

"No," Mai repeated, still calm. "If you recommend anything, you recommend it to both of us. We do not split."

Ace's needle steadied as if she'd been handed a railing.

The man's smile returned, strained now. "You're being defensive."

Mai looked at him like he'd mispronounced a basic word. "I'm being consistent."

He leaned forward slightly, the first hint of impatience showing through the polish. "This is Foundation protocol."

Mai's eyes stayed on him. "Show me the protocol. In writing."

Silence.

The camera dome in the corner watched them all like a bored god.

The man inhaled slowly. "Agent Mai, you're not under investigation."

Mai's mouth twitched. "Then stop talking like you're trying to build one."

Ace let out a quiet breath that might've been laughter if it had any joy in it.

The man's cheeks tightened.

Mai didn't push harder. She didn't need to. She'd already done what mattered: she'd made the room visible. She'd made the conversation awkward to manipulate. She'd forced the pressure to show its teeth.

"Here's what you get," Mai said, measured, professional. "You get the logs that were already submitted, re-forwarded through official channel. You get a note stating we complied. You get our written statement: no subjective anomaly influence observed, no deviation from containment procedure, no follow-up required at field level."

The man's eyes narrowed. "And if Oversight disagrees."

Mai's tone remained bored. "Then Oversight can put it in writing."

Ace's needle ticked, then steadied again—like the air itself had tried a small shove and failed.

The man sat back. He looked at Mai, then at Ace, then at the camera dome as if he'd just remembered it existed.

"Fine," he said. "We'll proceed formally."

Mai nodded. "Good."

He stood. "You'll be contacted."

Mai didn't stand. "We always are."

He left without another smile.

The door shut. The room's hum returned.

Ace exhaled like she'd been holding her breath without noticing. "That was gross."

Mai finally looked at the needle. Stable.

"Yeah," Mai said. "It was."

Ace tilted her head. "He wanted to separate me."

Mai gathered her tablet and rose. "He wanted to see if we'd let him."

Ace's gaze sharpened. "And you didn't."

Mai's tone stayed simple. "No private rooms."

Ace's mouth twitched. "You said that like a prayer."

"It's not a prayer," Mai said, walking toward the door. "It's a rule."

They stepped back into the corridor.

And that's when Mai noticed the second quiet sign.

Not in the air this time.

In herself.

Her own muscles were tighter than they should've been. Her own mind was running faster than it needed to. The pressure Ace had described—the pressure on choice—it wasn't just on Ace.

It was on them.

They walked past a window that reflected their shapes side by side: Mai's posture controlled, Ace's silhouette compact and ready.

A pair.

Mai hated the thought that someone, somewhere, might be studying that pairing like a variable.

Ace spoke without looking at her. “We’re not the problem.”

Mai kept her face neutral, but her voice went a shade lower. “No.”

Ace’s eyes flicked to her. “Then what is.”

Mai didn’t answer immediately. They passed two researchers arguing quietly over a clipboard. Human nonsense. Comforting in its stupidity.

Then Mai said it, not as a theory, but as the first honest hint she’d allow herself.

“The fragment wasn’t the problem,” Mai said. “The resonance was.”

Ace’s needle gave a small, obedient twitch—as if the word resonance had weight.

Mai didn’t slow.

She chose the corridor with the most people in it.

Witness.

Procedure.

Boring warfare.

And under all of it, that pressure—quiet, patient—stayed close enough to be felt, like something walking behind them in the same rhythm.

Not attacking.

Just learning. —

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