

Chapter 7: Oversight Disengages

The Foundation didn't "announce" a withdrawal.

It arranged one.

Mai felt it first in small things—the way doors opened a fraction slower, the way a name on a routing list quietly changed, the way a request that normally got answered in minutes sat unanswered long enough to become its own message.

Administrative silence was a language. The Foundation spoke it fluently.

On day one, their schedule went blank.

Not cleared. Not canceled. Just... empty. Like someone had taken the ink off the page.

Mai stared at the tablet over breakfast while the kettle warmed and Ace pretended not to watch her.

Ace had a piece of toast in her hand and didn't eat it.

"You're doing the counting thing again," Ace said.

Mai didn't look up. "I'm doing the listening thing."

Ace's mouth twitched. "Same sin. Different outfit."

Mai finally set the tablet down and looked across the table. "They're not assigning us."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Stand-down."

Mai nodded once. "Soft stand-down."

Ace leaned back, chair tilting, boots planted. "So they're scared."

Mai's expression stayed neutral. "Or they're reorganizing."

Ace's gaze sharpened. "Same thing."

Mai didn't argue. She went to the window instead and watched the city do its dull, winter routine—people walking like the cold was a debt, cars moving in cautious streams, a sky that looked like it had forgotten how to be bright.

Her tablet chimed once.

A message this time, not a schedule tick.

Mai opened it with her thumb.

INTERNAL / ADMIN SUBJECT: Temporary Availability Adjustment CONTENT: Agent Ace is recommended for short-term stand-down pending routine physiological assessment. Agent Mai remains on limited active rotation. Further guidance to follow.

Mai stared at the text until her jaw tightened.

Across from her, Ace's posture changed immediately—subtle, but unmistakable. Her shoulders went

hard. Her eyes went bright.

She didn't ask to read it.

She didn't need to.

"They're splitting us," Ace said quietly.

Mai's voice stayed flat. "Yes."

Ace's toast cracked softly in her hand. "No."

Mai didn't soothe. She didn't reassure. She didn't say it was fine.

She said the truth.

"They're trying," Mai corrected. "They haven't succeeded."

Ace's gaze locked on her like a knife. "What are you going to do."

Mai turned from the window and walked back to the table. She set the tablet down between them so Ace could see it without taking it.

Ace read it in silence. The needle under her sleeve wasn't visible, but Mai could see the rise in her throat when she swallowed.

Ace looked up. "Physiological assessment."

Mai nodded. "A polite cage."

Ace's mouth tightened. "They want me alone."

Mai's eyes stayed steady. "They want you in a room with no witnesses."

Ace's fingers tapped the table once, sharp. "So we refuse."

Mai shook her head once. "We don't refuse."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Excuse me."

Mai kept her tone boring, because boring was control. "Refusal makes it adversarial. Refusal becomes a story. They'll escalate quietly and we'll lose leverage."

Ace's jaw worked. "Then what."

Mai picked up her cup, took a sip, and tasted nothing. Then she set it down gently.

"We accept," Mai said. "On our terms."

Ace stared at her, suspicion bright in her eyes. "Meaning."

Mai tapped the tablet with one finger. "We reply in writing. We agree to assessment. Joint assessment. Same time. Same location. Recorded. With documented scope and authority."

Ace's mouth twitched, half admiration, half irritation. "Paper warfare."

Mai's expression didn't change. "Boring warfare."

Ace leaned back slightly, but the tension didn't leave. "And when they say no."

Mai's answer was instant. "Then we escalate the request upward. In writing."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "To Oversight."

Mai nodded once. "Yes. Let them either sign it or deny it."

Ace stared at her for a beat, then let out a short breath—almost laughter, almost rage. "You're going to force them to show their hand."

Mai's eyes stayed on hers. "I'm going to force them to leave fingerprints."

Ace looked away, jaw tight. "They'll hate that."

Mai shrugged slightly. "Good."

Ace's gaze flicked back. "Are you scared?"

Mai didn't lie. She also didn't dramatize.

"Yes," Mai said. "But fear doesn't get to drive."

Ace's mouth twitched faintly, and for a second her usual edge returned—sharp, alive, not just defensive.

"Good," Ace said. "Because I don't want to be put on a shelf."

Mai nodded once. "You won't."

She opened the reply field and began typing. Slow. Deliberate. Each word chosen like it might be used against them later.

We acknowledge the recommended assessment. We accept under the following conditions: 1) Joint attendance (Agent Ace + Agent Mai). 2) Location: Conference 3 or equivalent monitored space. 3) Scope documented in advance; authority signature required. 4) Recording enabled; copies routed to Oversight and Legal. 5) No separation interviews. No private rooms.

Mai paused, then added the line that would make the whole thing either work or explode:

If these conditions cannot be met, provide written justification and alternate proposal for joint assessment.

She sent it.

The confirmation ping felt like a door locking.

Ace stared at the tablet. "That's going to be fun."

Mai's tone stayed dry. "Fun is not the word."

Ace's mouth twitched. "It's the word I'm choosing anyway."

Mai almost smiled. Almost.

The reply came faster than Mai expected—too fast for normal bureaucracy. That meant someone had been waiting.

INTERNAL / ADMIN ACKNOWLEDGED. WE WILL ADVISE.

Mai stared at those three words.

“‘We will advise’ means they’re angry,” Ace said.

“It means they didn’t expect resistance that looks like compliance,” Mai corrected.

Ace’s eyes sharpened. “They’ll try another angle.”

Mai nodded once. “Yes.”

Ace’s gaze drifted, unfocusing for a fraction—like she was listening to something just outside hearing range.

Mai noticed immediately. “Ace.”

Ace blinked, snapped back. “What.”

Mai kept her voice low. “Did you feel it.”

Ace hesitated. Just a fraction.

Then she nodded once, tight. “A nudge.”

Mai’s jaw clenched. “Where.”

Ace’s mouth tightened. “To say yes. To make it easy.”

Mai felt her own skin prickle. The pressure on choice—subtle, polite—had always liked clean outcomes.

Stand-down. Separation. A neat little isolation.

Mai leaned forward slightly. “You didn’t.”

Ace’s eyes held hers. “No.”

Mai exhaled slowly. “Good.”

Ace’s voice went quieter. “It wants us split.”

Mai nodded once. “Yes.”

Ace’s fingers tapped the table again, slower now. “So we don’t split.”

Mai’s reply was immediate and absolute. “We don’t split.”

They sat in silence for a moment—two cups on the table, a tablet between them, the city moving outside like nothing had changed.

But something had.

The Foundation had made its move.

And for the first time, Mai felt the shape of the next phase—not a mission, not a fragment, not a seam in a pumping station.

A quieter fight.

Inside the system.

With forms and rooms and “recommendations” that were really restraints.

Mai stood and grabbed her coat.

Ace looked up. “Where.”

Mai’s tone stayed calm. “We leave.”

Ace blinked. “Now?”

Mai nodded. “Before they decide we can’t.”

Ace’s mouth twitched, that faint, dangerous humor. “Not running.”

Mai met her gaze. “Not running.”

Ace stood, fluid, ready. “Just... out of the pressure.”

Mai’s eyes stayed steady. “Exactly.”

Ace glanced at the katana cases by the wall.

Mai watched her glance and shook her head once.

“Not a blade day,” Mai said.

Ace’s mouth tightened. She didn’t argue. “Then what.”

Mai’s answer was simple.

“Procedure,” Mai said. “And witnesses.”

Ace’s eyes brightened—focused, alive.

Mai opened the door.

They stepped into the corridor.

And as Mai locked the apartment behind them, she felt it again—the faint draft, the pressure on choice, the suggestion to turn left.

Mai chose right out of pure spite.

Ace’s breath hitched—then steadied.

“No private rooms,” Mai said softly, not a prayer, not a plea.

A rule.

Ace nodded once. “No private rooms.”

They walked.

And behind them, somewhere deep in the Foundation’s machine, someone realized the easy route had been denied.

So they would try again.

But next time, it wouldn’t be polite.

It would be clever. —

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