

Chapter 1 - Echoes in the Wires

Rain lashed the city before they reached it, needling the streets into restless seams. Neon blurred across the wet glass of shopfronts and billboards, smearing colors into something unsteady, something alive. When Ace and Mai finally stepped into their apartment, neither reached for the overhead lights. Silence pressed in, the kind that waited for instructions.

The chalk mark on the wall—their crooked square with the diagonal—had been there since the night they moved in. Ace had scrawled it deliberately wrong, diagonal too long, corners frayed by her palm. Tonight it glimmered faintly, a self-made ember glowing through plaster.

Mai dropped a damp grocery bag onto the counter and pulled her wet jacket off with a frustrated jerk. Strands of silver hair clung to her cheek and neck. She glanced at the chalk mark, then at Ace.

“Did you—?” she began.

Ace shook her head, water dripping from her black coat. “Not me. It’s doing that on its own.”

Violet’s whisper rose in Ace’s skull, cool and insinuating. *Little blade. The lock is already turned. Open it wider. Just a touch.*

Ace clenched her jaw. “No.”

Mai caught the tone, even without hearing the whisper. She set the bag aside and tore into a sandwich wrapper. “Sit first. Eat something. Then talk.”

Ace obeyed, sinking onto the couch. The cushions sagged with a metallic creak, tired of being leaned on by hunters who never slept enough.

“We broke the loom,” she said around a mouthful of bread and vinegar. “But the threads aren’t gone. They learned a new trick. Screens. Cameras. Anything that reflects you.”

Mai’s brow furrowed. She wiped her hands on a towel, then held out her palm. “Show me.”

Ace thumbed her phone awake and opened the mirror app. The screen lit her face in low light, smoothing her features into something uncanny. For a moment, her violet-flecked eyes pulsed brighter. Then the diagonal mark reflected faintly in the digital glass. The app hiccupped. A thin crimson filament crawled across the display.

Mai didn’t flinch. Instead, she caught Ace’s hand and lifted it. Without hesitation, she bit the pad of Ace’s thumb—quick and sharp—drawing a bead of blood. She smeared it across Ace’s wrist in a crooked line, recreating the diagonal deliberately wrong.

The phone screen convulsed. A smell like hot dust bled out before the app crashed altogether.

“That’s our answer,” Mai muttered. She pressed the towel against Ace’s hand and met her eyes. “They’re using devices to nudge people into patterns. The reflection tells you who you’re supposed to be, and you follow without realizing. Predictive alignment disguised as self-image.”

“And the best version is obedient,” Ace said darkly.

Rain counted uneven rhythms on the windows, as if mocking the order outside.

Mai pulled her battered tablet from the table, its casing carved with protective runes. “Kaarlo checked

in—three more patients at the noise clinic. The teens are chalking half the town. And Bright...” She paused, lips twitching. “Bright leaked something.”

She slid the device across to Ace. A Foundation memo glared back, stamped INTERNAL: **CANTOR ISOLATION ADVISORY: VECTORS OF DISSONANCE IDENTIFIED. SUBJECT A-LOCK (female / petite / katanas / black hair). SUBJECT M-RED (female / silver hair / disruptor device). OBSERVE ONLY. MINIMIZE CONTACT. SURRENDER DEVICES FOR CALIBRATION.**

“They want us quarantined,” Mai said, voice clipped. “Again.”

Ace’s smirk was thin. “The Foundation wants us quiet and alone. The threads want us quiet and together. That’s the theme.”

“You’ve never been quiet in your life,” Mai shot back.

Violet purred in Ace’s mind, pleased. *Born wrong. It’s why I love you.*

Ace ignored her and stood, katanas vibrating faintly in their sheaths. “We need to test it. If it’s only our wall, fine. If it’s the whole city...”

“Then we cut the mic,” Mai finished. She pulled a modified radio from her jacket, wires and charms braided together. “I’ve got a filter. Ugly enough to make any algorithm choke. If I hit a few junctions, I can spread it like static.”

They moved quickly. Within fifteen minutes they were in the metro station, where the crowd gathered in weary silence. Advert screens loomed overhead, brighter than the tiled walls.

The first thread appeared without fanfare: a single crimson filament sliding across an ad for shoes. Commuters shuffled unconsciously, spacing themselves evenly, shoulders adjusting, breaths aligning. Within seconds, a perfect line had formed.

“See?” Ace murmured.

Mai pressed the radio against a support pillar and keyed the tablet. “Ugly enough, they can’t sync. Ready?”

The screens spasmed. Faces distorted, colors jittered, reflections lagged a heartbeat behind. A boy at the end of the line began to hop in place. His mother tugged at him, but the order had already cracked. The man in the blue coat coughed twice, deliberately off-beat, and the line dissolved back into a crowd.

The red filament writhed and vanished.

Ace’s shoulders eased. “You just killed a minor apocalypse with a jellyfish filter.”

Mai’s mouth twitched into something close to a smile. “Temporary. But now we know—if the reflection is imperfect, the loop stalls.”

Violet pressed against Ace’s mind again. *Let me in. I can unmake their wires forever.*

Ace grimaced. “She wants me to open.”

Mai tucked the device away and stepped closer, damp silver hair brushing Ace’s cheek. She took Ace’s wrist, tracing the crooked diagonal with her nail. “Not for her. Not until I ask. We make noise

first.”

The train screamed into the station. The line was broken, the crowd alive again. As they boarded, Ace glanced at the platform wall. Someone—maybe a teenager, maybe nobody important—had chalked a crooked square in the corner. The sight tightened her chest in a way no enemy ever did.

By the time they reached home, the city was already louder. Chalk marks bloomed like weeds across concrete. The wall mark in their apartment flared briefly as Mai compiled code into a crude, stubborn app: a black box that spread ugliness through every camera it touched.

Ace redrew the diagonal on the wall, adding a crooked tooth to its base—a key, not just a square. The air smelled faintly of ozone. The upload went live.

Somewhere in the city, a screen hiccupped. Somewhere else, a line faltered.

“Echoes in the wires,” Mai whispered.

Ace’s smirk returned, tired but alive. “Then let’s answer them.”

The chalk mark glowed once more, then settled into a steady ember, as if the building itself had agreed.

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