

Epilogue — Breathing in the Aftermath

The safe flat two districts over had the decency to be small on purpose. A window with fog like frosting. A radiator that ticked like a watch. A couch two sizes too big for Ace and exactly right for Mai when Ace was on it too.

They shed gear without ceremony. Coils into cases, pistol onto table, katanas leaned like sleeping animals. Mai peeled duct tape off her jacket elbow and replaced it with new, neat strips; Ace stole one and stuck it crooked on the lamp. Mai fixed it without looking.

“Your mirror smiled at you again,” Mai said, not asking.

“And your kitchen tried to make tea,” Ace said, not asking.

“They’re getting better at the props,” Mai admitted, sitting and letting gravity do her posture for a minute. “Still not the smell right.”

Ace stretched the kink out of a shoulder and winced the kind of wince you only share with one person. Mai’s hand went there without being told, thumb to tendon, a pressure that filed the pain down to something useful.

“You good?” Ace asked after a while, meaning six other questions.

Mai’s mouth tipped. “Inside voice,” she said, and the words had the weight of a spell when you say it with the right person in the room.

Ace leaned her forehead to Mai’s temple for a second that had the shape of a promise. “With you? Always.”

The radiator ticked. The fog against the glass made the city softer than it deserved. Somewhere below, a scooter lied to the night about how fast it was. The flat breathed with them, small on purpose, exactly the size a room should be when two people decide it is.

Ace’s hand found Mai’s and stayed. The world had been rooms and rules and wrong mirrors for a long time today. Here there was only breath and heat and the unembarrassed ordinary of being exactly where you meant to be.

They didn’t talk plans. The next call would come. Bright would grin with all his teeth and show them a door. The universe would test how much they could hold. That was tomorrow’s shape.

Tonight, there was the quiet victory of bodies that remembered how to rest.

Later—when skin had warmed skin and the city’s noises had turned into a blanket instead of a knife—Mai’s voice drifted up, soft and smiling in the dark.

“Paint lies,” she murmured.

“Chalk lies less,” Ace answered, and the room agreed.

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