



CHAPTER 1 — Mandatory Morale Stabilization

Site-19 Recreational Annex had been designed by someone who believed in optimism.

There were folding tables.

Plastic chairs.

A vending machine that hummed with false promise.

A whiteboard that still said *TEAM BUILDING WEEK* in faded marker.

It smelled faintly of disinfectant and something citrus that had lost the will to live.

Triad entered first.

Mai's eyes swept the room automatically — exits, corners, structural weaknesses.

None.

Just... normal.

Ace walked beside her, hands in pockets, silent as always. The absence of threat did not make her relax; it only removed the immediate task.

Behind them, Shammy ducked slightly under the doorway frame.

The fluorescent lights flickered once.

They steadied.

Across the room, Theta-24 was already assembled.

Badger leaned back in a plastic chair that objected audibly to the attempt.

Skullker stood with arms folded, posture reading *breach stance* despite the lack of doors to break.

Grouse observed.

Jello scrolled.

Heavenly Father looked like a man who suspected paperwork was imminent.

Bright stood at the front, next to a stainless steel tray covered with aluminum foil.

He wore sunglasses.

Indoors.

“Excellent,” he said brightly. “My two favorite government-sanctioned consequences.”

Mai crossed her arms.

“Define ‘morale stabilization.’”

Bright beamed.

“Cross-unit integration through controlled physiological stress exposure.”

Badger tilted his head.

“...That sounds illegal.”

“It’s not,” Bright said cheerfully. “It’s funded.”

He whipped the foil back with theatrical flourish.

A neat arrangement of peppers sat on the tray, organized by size and color like a malicious rainbow.

Green.

Orange.

Red.

Deep red.

Something that looked like it had opinions.

Skullker leaned forward slightly.

“You’re kidding.”

Bright pointed to the whiteboard behind him. Written in fresh marker:

CONTROLLED SCOVILLE EXPOSURE STUDY

Cross-Unit Resilience Assessment

No anomalous enhancement.

No atmospheric manipulation.

No memetic suppression.

Pure biology.

Shammy read the third line again.

“No atmospheric manipulation?” she asked mildly.

Bright wagged a finger.

“Hands off the wind, Stormlight.”

Badger snorted.

“We just leveled a cult warehouse and now we’re being weaponized by vegetables.”

Bright clasped his hands.

“Correct.”

Silence settled.

Not hostile.

Just confused.

Skullker looked across the room — and his gaze landed on Ace.

He studied her for a moment.

Small frame.

Still posture.

Unreadable expression.

“How much heat can that one handle?” he asked casually.

No malice.

Just challenge.

The room shifted half a degree.

Mai didn’t look at Skullker.

Shammy did.

Ace looked up.

Violet eyes steady.

She didn’t answer.

She walked to the table instead.

Picked up the smallest green pepper.

Examined it like it might be a tool.

Then set it back down.

Skullker’s mouth twitched.

“Oh,” Badger muttered. “It’s happening.”

Bright’s smile widened.

“Well then. If we’re generating hypotheses...”

He clapped once.

“All right. Friendly competition. Volunteer basis.”

Skullker stepped forward immediately.

“Baseline first,” he said.

Ace remained where she was.

Still.

Shammy leaned slightly toward her.

“You don’t have to.”

Ace’s response was quiet.

“I am not being measured.”

That was not bravado.

That was principle.

Mai exhaled through her nose.

“This is statistically irresponsible.”

Bright pointed at her.

“Yes.”

Skullker picked up a jalapeño and held it between his fingers.

“Baseline,” he repeated.

He looked at Ace again.

“Unless you’d rather observe.”

Ace stepped forward.

No announcement.

No performance.

She picked up her own jalapeño.

Badger straightened in his chair.

Grouse’s attention sharpened.

Heavenly Father rubbed his forehead.

Jello stopped scrolling.

Shammy folded her hands behind her back — consciously.

Bright lifted an imaginary starting pistol.

“No enhancements. No interference. No regrets.”

A beat.

“Three. Two. One.”

Skullker bit down.

Ace did the same.

Crunch.

The sound echoed too loudly in the fluorescent room.

Skullker chewed with theatrical confidence.

Ace chewed once. Twice.

Swallowed.

No visible reaction.

Skullker swallowed.

Grinned.

“Cute,” he said.

Ace blinked once.

Bright leaned against the table, delighted.

“Baseline complete. Escalation recommended.”

Badger leaned forward.

“Yes. Escalate.”

The tray gleamed under sterile lighting.

Orange waited.

The room no longer felt confused.

It felt invested.

And somewhere between fluorescent hum and capsaicin sting,
a different kind of tension began to build.

Not life or death.

Not containment failure.

Just ego.

And stubbornness.

And the very human refusal to step back.

Bright lifted the foil slightly, revealing the next tier.

“Round two,” he said lightly.

And for the first time since the warehouse,

no one was thinking about ash.

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CHAPTER 2 — Escalation Protocol

The jalapeño phase had been theater.

Habanero was not.

Bright removed the next tier from the tray like a surgeon presenting instruments.

Small. Wrinkled. Orange. Innocent-looking in the way dangerous things often were.

“Statistically significant jump,” Mai noted.

“Good,” Badger said. “Let’s test structural integrity.”

Skullker rolled his shoulders once.

“Still baseline.”

He picked one up.

Turned it between his fingers.

“Smells like regret.”

Ace stepped forward again without being invited.

She selected hers carefully — not the largest, not the smallest.

Equal.

Shammy shifted her weight.

The air near her hands trembled faintly before she stilled it by force of will.

Bright pointed casually at the whiteboard.

“No atmospheric assistance.”

“I know,” Shammy said.

Her voice was calm.

Her restraint was not effortless.

Grouse leaned back against the wall.

“This is where people reconsider life choices.”

Heavenly Father nodded once.

“Or reveal them.”

Bright lifted his hand again.

“No enhancement. No pride withdrawal clause. No early termination unless medically catastrophic.”

Mai tilted her head.

“Define catastrophic.”

Bright grinned.

“Vomiting.”

Skullker barked a short laugh.

“Please.”

“Three,” Bright said.

“Two.”

“One.”

Bite.

The crunch was softer this time.

Thicker flesh.

More oil.

More promise.

Skullker chewed deliberately.

Swallowed.

The grin stayed — but tightened slightly at the edges.

Ace chewed once.

Twice.

Her jaw paused for a fraction of a second before she swallowed.

Shammy noticed.

So did Mai.

Skullker inhaled slowly through his nose.

Bad choice.

His eyes flickered.

Still smiling.

“Okay,” he admitted. “That’s heat.”

Ace’s breathing had shifted — subtly.

Not faster.

Shallower.

She remained upright.

Still.

Bright leaned forward.

“Pulse?”

Mai didn’t answer immediately.

She was watching.

Tiny tremor in the flexor muscles of Ace’s left hand.

Minimal pupil dilation.

Core temperature rising.

“Adequate,” Mai said evenly.

Badger clapped once.

“Yes. Now we’re talking.”

Skullker wiped the corner of his mouth with his thumb.

“Still in.”

He looked at Ace.

“You?”

Ace blinked once.

“Yes.”

No inflection.

Not defiant.

Just true.

The burn began to bloom.

Habanero doesn't strike immediately.

It expands.

Heat crawled outward from tongue to throat.

Skullker exhaled slowly, controlling it.

Ace did not exhale.

She absorbed it.

Shammy took a half-step forward before catching herself.

The fluorescent lights flickered again.

Brief.

Minor.

Bright glanced at her.

She clasped her hands tighter behind her back.

The air settled.

Skullker's ears had gone slightly red.

He ignored it.

Ace's eyes had sharpened.

Violet focus narrowing inward.

This was no longer about Skullker.

It was about refusal.

Grouse pushed off the wall.

“Heartbeat's up,” he said casually, watching both.

Badger smirked.

“This is the dumbest thing we’ve done all month.”

Heavenly Father raised a brow.

“That’s objectively false.”

Silence returned for a moment.

The burn peaked.

Skullker swallowed hard.

Controlled.

Ace’s jaw flexed.

Just once.

Shammy leaned close enough that only Ace could hear her.

“You are heating.”

“I am aware.”

“You don’t have to.”

Ace’s eyes flicked to hers briefly.

“I do.”

Skullker caught the exchange.

Grinned through discomfort.

“Next tier?”

Bright did not hesitate.

He lifted the foil completely.

Deep red waited.

Ghost.

The room felt smaller now.

The vending machine hummed too loudly.

Badger exhaled in anticipation.

“Oh, yes.”

Mai’s gaze shifted from the tray to Ace.

Calculation.

Risk curve.

Threshold.

Skullker reached first.

Picked up the ghost pepper.

Held it between two fingers like something sacred and stupid.

He looked at Ace.

“Last chance to observe.”

Ace reached forward.

Picked up her own.

Shammy closed her eyes for half a second.

Centered herself.

No wind.

No pressure shift.

No help.

Pure biology.

Bright’s smile was predatory in the most academic way.

“Round three,” he said softly.

And for the first time,

no one in the room was entirely certain this was still recreational.

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CHAPTER 3 — Ghost Phase

Ghost peppers were smaller than expectation.

Dark red. Wrinkled. Compact.

Efficient.

The fluorescent lights hummed overhead like they were reconsidering their life choices.

Skullker held his between two fingers.

He rolled his neck once.

“Still baseline,” he said, though his voice had lost a fraction of its earlier edge.

Ace stood opposite him.

Ghost pepper resting in her palm.

She studied it the way she studied weapons — weight, structure, potential.

Mai stepped slightly to her left.

Not intervening.

Positioning.

Shammy’s hands remained clasped behind her back, fingers interlocked so tightly the knuckles whitened.

No atmospheric manipulation.

Pure biology.

Bright lifted an imaginary pistol again.

“No memetic buffering. No airflow modulation. No moral objections.”

Heavenly Father sighed.

“This is how civilizations fall.”

“Three,” Bright said.

“Two.”

“One.”

They bit down.

Ghost pepper skin gives way reluctantly.

Thicker. Oil-heavy.

Skullker chewed twice.

Three times.

Swallowed.

The grin remained — but it trembled.

Ace chewed once.

Paused.

Swallowed.

Silence.

Then it arrived.

Ghost does not bloom.

It detonates.

Heat ripped outward from tongue to throat like something trying to escape containment.

Skullker's breath hitched.

He masked it with a short exhale.

"Okay," he managed. "That's—"

He stopped speaking.

Eyes watered.

Not dramatically.

Just enough.

Ace's pupils tightened sharply.

Her jaw flexed once.

Twice.

Her hands remained at her sides.

The burn climbed.

Up the sinuses.

Down the throat.

Into the chest.

Shammy's head tilted almost imperceptibly.

The air pressure around Ace shifted a micro-degree before stabilizing again.

She corrected herself.

No interference.

Skullker inhaled through his nose.

Immediate mistake.

His shoulders locked.

Badger leaned forward in his chair, eyes wide with delight.

"Yes. Yes. There it is."

Grouse pushed off the wall, studying both of them carefully.

“Core temp spike.”

Mai’s voice was even.

“Within survivable parameters.”

Skullker swallowed again.

It looked like effort.

He forced a grin that no longer reached his eyes.

“Still in.”

His voice was rougher now.

Ace had not spoken.

Her breathing had become shallow and controlled — measured in thin, precise increments.

The heat hit the back of her throat like a blade.

Her fingers curled slightly.

Just slightly.

Shammy leaned closer, voice barely audible.

“You are exceeding baseline.”

Ace did not look at her.

“I am not finished.”

The burn crested.

It wasn’t sharp anymore.

It was total.

Skullker’s face had gone red — not embarrassment, just physics.

He rolled his shoulders, trying to maintain posture.

Sweat traced along his temple.

Ace’s expression did not change.

But her eyes had sharpened inward.

Focus compressed.

Not on Skullker.

On endurance.

Bright clapped once, too loudly.

“Excellent response curve.”

He peeled back the final layer of foil.

And the room quieted.

Capsicum Prime.

Deep crimson. Larger. Slightly malformed.

Not anomalous.

Just engineered enthusiasm.

“Technically legal,” Bright said proudly.

Heavenly Father stared at him.

“That does not help.”

Badger exhaled slowly.

“This is the dumbest hill anyone has ever chosen.”

Skullker looked at the final pepper.

Then at Ace.

He was sweating openly now.

But he nodded.

“Last round.”

Ace did not hesitate.

She reached forward.

Picked up the Prime.

Shammy closed her eyes for half a second.

Centered.

No wind.

No pressure shift.

No rescue.

Mai watched Ace’s hands.

There was the faintest tremor now.

Small.

Human.

Skullker raised his pepper.

“So be it.”

Bright lifted his imaginary pistol again.

“Final escalation.”

Silence filled the recreational annex.

No sirens.

No collapsing warehouse.

Just fluorescent hum and capsaicin.

“Three.”

“Two.”

“One.”

They bit.

Capsicum Prime was thicker.

Juicier.

It ruptured under pressure.

Oil hit immediately.

Skullker inhaled sharply — involuntary this time.

Ace swallowed too fast.

The burn wasn't a wave.

It was a wall.

Skullker staggered half a step before correcting himself.

Ace's vision sharpened into a narrow tunnel.

Heat flooded downward.

Upward.

Every nerve firing.

Shammy's hands trembled behind her back.

The lights flickered.

Just once.

She forced herself still.

No interference.

Skullker clenched his fists.

"Still—" he tried.

The word died.

Ace swayed — barely.

Mai stepped half an inch closer without thinking.

Skullker looked across the table at her.

Not mocking now.

Not challenging.

Just measuring.

Ace's jaw tightened.

Her eyes watered — not from emotion.

From physics.

Ten seconds.

Twenty.

Skullker exhaled violently and dropped into the nearest chair.

Not collapse.

Just... gravity.

Ace remained standing.

Rigid.

Too rigid.

Shammy moved — not touching, just near enough that the air cooled a fraction of a fraction.

Mai reached calmly to the side table.

Picked up a glass of milk.

Held it out without looking directly at Ace.

Ace held her position two more seconds.

Then took it.

Drank.

No acknowledgment.

Skullker wiped his face with his sleeve.

Looked at her.

Really looked.

He gave a short nod.

Not defeat.

Not victory.

Recognition.

Bright clapped slowly.

“Fascinating.”

Badger leaned back, stunned.

“...Okay. That was worth it.”

Heavenly Father stared at the ceiling.

“We are idiots.”

Grouse crossed his arms.

“Yeah.”

Jello resumed scrolling.

“Recording archived.”

Ace set the empty glass down.

Her breathing steadied.

The burn receded from total to survivable.

Shammy’s shoulders lowered.

The lights stopped flickering.

No one declared a winner.

No one needed to.

Skullker leaned back in his chair.

“You didn’t flinch,” he said.

Ace met his gaze.

“I did.”

A beat.

He huffed a quiet laugh.

“Yeah.”

Silence settled.

Not awkward.

Not hostile.

Just... equal.

Bright scribbled something on the whiteboard.

PEPPER PROTOCOL — SUCCESSFUL

And for the first time since the warehouse,

the air felt light.

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CHAPTER 4 — Aftermath

Capsaicin doesn’t disappear.

It lingers.

It recedes in layers.

The recreational annex had gone quiet in a way that felt almost ceremonial.

Skullker leaned back in his chair, elbows on his knees, breathing slowly through his mouth like someone who had just outrun something invisible.

Badger stared at the tray like it had personally offended him.

“...We weaponized produce.”

“Technically,” Bright corrected, scribbling on the whiteboard, “we facilitated inter-unit bonding

through controlled biochemical adversity.”

He underlined *Pepper Protocol* twice.

Heavenly Father rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“We need better hobbies.”

Grouse stepped closer to the table, examining the last empty stem.

“No anomalous signatures,” he said. “Just pain.”

“Correct,” Mai replied.

Ace stood still a moment longer before sitting.

Not collapsing.

Just choosing gravity.

Shammy lowered herself beside her — too tall for the plastic chair, knees angled slightly outward. She leaned forward, forearms resting lightly on her thighs.

The fluorescent lights hummed normally now.

No flicker.

No atmospheric rebellion.

Ace’s breathing had stabilized into its usual quiet rhythm.

Mai watched her for another three seconds.

Satisfied.

Then she finally relaxed her shoulders.

Skullker wiped his face again, less urgently now.

He glanced across the table at Ace.

“Thought you’d fold at Ghost,” he admitted.

Ace tilted her head slightly.

“Why?”

He considered that.

“Size.”

A beat.

Ace’s expression didn’t change.

“Pain scales poorly with assumption.”

Badger made a low approving sound.

“Okay. I’m stealing that.”

Bright circled something on the board dramatically.

“Key observation: minimal ego collapse despite thermal overload.”

“Define minimal,” Heavenly Father muttered.

Skullker gave a short, dry laugh that still sounded faintly scorched.

He extended a hand across the table.

Not aggressively.

Not ceremonially.

Just straightforward.

Ace looked at it.

Then shook it.

Firm.

Brief.

Done.

Shammy watched the exchange closely — not suspiciously.

Just aware.

Grouse exhaled quietly.

“That’ll change things.”

Mai glanced at him.

“How?”

“Next time we’re stacked on a breach,” he said, “nobody’s wondering who cracks first.”

There it was.

The actual point.

Not vegetables.

Not pride.

Reliability.

Bright clapped his hands once more.

“Well! Data collected. Bonds strengthened. No fatalities. I’m calling that a win.”

Jello raised his tablet slightly.

“Filed under morale expense.”

Heavenly Father shook his head slowly.

“I’m never explaining this in a report.”

“You don’t have to,” Bright said brightly. “I will.”

Badger stood and stretched.

“So what’s next, doc? Wasabi trials?”

“Don’t tempt me.”

Silence softened into something that almost resembled ease.

Triad stood together without coordinating it.

Mai in the center.

Ace to one side.

Shammy to the other, towering slightly over both.

Theta-24 remained by the table a moment longer.

Skullker glanced at Ace again.

“You didn’t flinch,” he repeated, more thoughtfully this time.

Ace met his eyes.

“I did.”

He studied her face.

Then nodded once.

“Yeah.”

He didn’t need more.

Triad turned toward the exit.

Shammy had to duck slightly beneath the doorframe again.

This time, no one pretended not to notice.

Badger watched them leave.

“They’re weird,” he said.

Grouse shrugged.

“Yeah.”

Heavenly Father folded his arms.

“Stable.”

Skullker watched the door close.

“...Yeah.”

Not friendship.

Not alliance.

But calibration.

The next time concrete cracked and alarms screamed and something inhuman tried to rewrite the rules—

They would remember this room.

The fluorescent hum.

The stupid tray of peppers.

The fact that pain had been shared without a mission attached.

Bright capped his marker with satisfaction.

“Pepper Protocol,” he said softly.

“Successful.”

Outside, somewhere deeper in Site-19, reality continued its slow attempt to unravel.

Inside the annex,

for once,

no one was bracing for it.

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