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Chapter 9: The Depth's Silence

<!-- Word count: 3,500 | Target: 3,500 | Anchor: The weight of knowing without saying -->

The fragments came for Mai.

Ace stood at the perimeter. Same position. Same distance. But this time when the archive reached for her it didn't show doors or breaches or the geometry of impossible spaces.

It showed her Mai.

First fragment. Blade to the chest. Not pain, something worse.

Recognition.

Mai standing in front of the archive. Her hands moving over instruments that didn't exist yet. Her analytical framework intact, solving it, the pattern that had refused to resolve was resolving and Mai was the one doing it.

Then the image fractured.

Same room. Same Mai. Different outcome. Her framework wasn't solving anything. It was breaking. She was on her knees, her notebook falling from her hands, her mind coming apart the way Shammy's core had come apart.

Another fracture.

Mai dead.

Ace's body moved before her mind caught up. Hand on her blade. Weight shifting forward. The instinct to protect surging through her like current.

Nothing to fight. The archive wasn't attacking Mai. It was showing Ace something that hadn't happened yet.

Or might.

Or already had, in a version of reality where the archive's geometry made sense.

The fragments kept coming.

Ace tried to turn away. Tried to receive something else. The archive's attention was broad, she'd felt that before, the way it could hold multiple perceptions at once.

She reached for fragments about the facility. The breach. Dr. Velasco's reports. Anything that wasn't Mai.

The archive pushed back.

Not hostile. Focused. Like a blade that had found its target and wouldn't be redirected. The archive wanted Ace to see this. Specifically this.

Mai, over and over.

Possibilities multiplying.

In one fragment Mai stood alone. Her analytical framework had evolved into something Ace didn't recognize. Something that could hold the archive's patterns without breaking. She was solving it, but she wasn't Mai anymore. She was something else. Something that understood the archive too well.

In another, Mai had walked away. Left the facility. Left the triad. Ace watched her go, and the weight of that departure sat in her chest like a stone.

In another she was already gone. Not dead. Not solved. Just absent. A gap where Mai should be.

In another, Mai turned to Ace and said something Ace couldn't hear. Her mouth moved. Her eyes held something like recognition. Like she'd finally understood something about Ace that Ace had been hiding.

Then that image fractured too.

The archive wasn't showing Ace the future. It was showing her possibility. Branching paths extending from Mai's current position. Every choice she might make. Every outcome.

And through all of them, one thread held constant.

Mai would change.

Whether she solved the archive or broke against it. Whether she left or stayed. Whether she died or lived. In every fragment, Mai was different by the end. The Mai that Ace knew, analytical, structured, desperate to understand, that Mai was a temporary state. A moment in a larger pattern.

The archive was showing Ace that Mai wasn't a fixed point.

She was a process.

Ace's instinct moved before her mind caught up.

Tell her.

The instinct was clear. Simple. Mai needed to know that the archive was showing possibilities about her. That something in the archive's perception had locked onto Mai specifically. That there were fragments, dozens, maybe hundreds, and every one showed Mai changing.

Ace's instinct said: tell her.

Ace's wound said: no.

The wound was old. Older than Mai. Older than the triad. Older than anything Ace could name.

Knowing things before they happened. Seeing possibilities and being unable to stop them. Carrying fragments that weighed more than blades and couldn't be fought.

If she told Mai, Mai would want to analyze the fragments. Map the possibilities. Understand the archive's perception.

And in trying to understand, she'd get closer.

Closer to the archive. Closer to the thing showing Ace images of Mai breaking, Mai solving, Mai dead, Mai different.

If Ace told her, Mai would move toward the very thing that might destroy her.

If Ace didn't tell her, Mai would stay distant. Would stay Mai. Would stay the person Ace had learned to trust, the one who mapped and analyzed and made sense of things that didn't make sense.

But the distance was already growing.

Ace could feel it. A gap opening between her perception and Mai's. Every fragment she received created weight. Every possibility she saw added to the burden. And Mai, Mai who analyzed everything, Mai who noticed patterns, she would notice the gap.

She would feel Ace withdrawing.

And she would ask.

The archive room hummed. Same patient presence. Same curious attention.

Ace at the perimeter. Mai near her instruments. Shammy barely present, still recovering from her core destabilization, still holding herself together through will and habit.

The triad held its shape. But the space between them was wrong.

Ace could feel it. The distance that came from secrets. The gap that came from carrying something you couldn't share.

Her hand found her blade. Not for defense. Grounding. The familiar weight reminded her that she was Ace. That she received fragments but didn't have to act on them. That knowing and doing were different.

But the weight kept growing.

“Ace.”

Flat. Observational. But something underneath. The tone she used when she'd noticed something and was trying to decide whether to name it.

Ace didn't turn. “Yeah.”

“You're at the perimeter again.”

“That's my position.”

“That's not what I mean.” Mai's footsteps approached. One. Two. Three. Her presence entered Ace's awareness. “You're at the perimeter, but you're not receiving. You're holding.”

“Holding.”

“Something came through. A fragment. A batch of fragments.” Mai's voice was precise. Analytical. “You received them, and then you stopped receiving. And now you're standing here, and your presence is wrong.”

“Wrong.”

“Like something's changed. Like you're carrying something.” Mai moved closer. “What did the archive show you?”

The question hung.

What did the archive show you?

Ace could have answered. Could have said: It showed me you. Mai collapsing. Mai solving. Mai dead. Mai different. It showed me possibilities I can't stop. It showed me that you're going to change.

She could have said all of that.

But the words didn't come. Because if she said them, Mai would analyze them. Would try to understand. Would move closer to the archive, closer to the source of the fragments, closer to the very thing that was showing Ace images of Mai breaking.

So Ace said the only thing she could say.

“Nothing important.”

The lie landed like a blade in the wrong place.

Mai processed it. Ace could see her doing it, the way her posture shifted, the way her hands moved slightly, the way her framework tried to make sense of data that didn't fit.

"That's not true," Mai said. Not angry. Observational. "You received something. Your presence changed. Something happened."

"It's not about the archive."

"Then what is it about?"

Ace's instinct: tell her. Ace's wound: no. Ace's voice: "I can't explain."

"You can't, or you won't?"

"Both."

Mai stood silent for a long moment. Her framework was working. Trying to fit this new data into her understanding of the triad.

But there was no place for secrets in the triad. The triad was built on knowing each other. Mai mapping, Ace receiving, Shammy stabilizing.

If Ace started carrying things she couldn't share, the triad would fracture.

The archive watched. Patient. Curious.

Ace could feel its attention. Not pushing. Not pulling. Just present. It had shown her something about Mai. It was waiting to see what she would do with it.

She could tell Mai. Let her analyze. Let her try to understand. Let her move closer to the thing that might break her.

Or she could carry it. Alone. Let the distance grow. Let Mai feel the gap and wonder. Let the secret sit between them like a blade that couldn't be removed.

Neither option was right.

Neither wrong.

Just what existed. The possibilities the archive had shown her. The branching paths extending from this moment.

Shammy's presence flickered. Still in the room. Still holding herself together. But barely. The edges of her form kept softening, and she had to keep choosing, storm or person, weather or body, over and over.

She felt the tension between Ace and Mai. The atmospheric pressure of a secret being kept.

"You're hiding something," Shammy said. Her voice came distant. Faded. Like she was speaking from further away than her body.

"I'm not hiding anything."

"You are." Shammy's edges blurred. Stabilized. Blurred again. "The pressure between you and Mai is wrong. Like a storm front that won't move."

Ace didn't answer. Couldn't explain. Couldn't share. Couldn't do anything but stand at the perimeter and carry the weight of what she'd seen.

The fragments kept coming.

Even now. Even as Ace tried to hold them back. The archive was still showing her Mai. Possibilities multiplying. Branching paths.

In one fragment Mai asked directly. "What are you hiding?" And Ace told her. And Mai moved toward the archive. And Mai broke.

In another, Mai didn't ask. She felt the distance and pulled away. The triad fractured. Not because of anything Ace did, but because of what she couldn't do.

In another, Ace found a different answer. A way to tell Mai without pushing her closer. A way to share the burden without making it Mai's burden.

That fragment was thin. Almost invisible. A possibility so unlikely the archive barely showed it.

But it was there.

"Ace. I need you to tell me what's happening." Mai's voice came sharper. The analytical framework pressing against the edge of her control. "The data doesn't make sense. Your behavior doesn't make sense. There's a variable I'm missing, and I can't—"

She stopped. Her hands were shaking. Not the way they'd shaken when her framework collapsed. This was different. The shake of someone trying to hold onto something that was slipping away.

"I can't analyze if you won't give me data," Mai said. Quieter. "I can't help if I don't know what's wrong."

Ace turned.

Mai stood three meters away. Notebook in her hands, the same notebook she'd held when her framework collapsed, the same one she used to map everything that couldn't be mapped.

Her eyes were red-rimmed. Her posture rigid. Her framework was trying to work, but it was hitting against Ace's silence like a blade against stone.

"I know," Ace said.

"You know what?"

"I know that you need to understand. I know that not knowing is worse than knowing. I know that you're standing there, trying to analyze, and I'm not giving you anything to analyze."

Mai's breath caught. "Then why—"

"Because if I tell you, you'll do what you always do." Ace's voice came flat. Hard. "You'll try to understand it. You'll move toward it. You'll get closer. And the archive is showing me fragments. About you. And I don't want you closer to the thing that's showing me you breaking."

The words landed.

Mai's analytical framework processed them. Ace watched her do it, the way her posture shifted, the way her hands tightened on her notebook, the way her eyes moved to the archive and then back to Ace.

"Breaking."

"Maybe. Probably. I don't know." Shorter sentences now. The instinct to protect pressing against the instinct to share. "The fragments show possibilities. Not futures. Just paths. And every path has you changing."

"Changing how?"

"Different. Breaking. Solving. Dead." Ace's jaw tightened. "Gone."

Mai stood silent. The analytical framework running. Trying to make sense of this. Trying to fit Ace's fragments into her understanding.

But her framework had already collapsed once today. It was still rebuilding. And Ace's words were hitting it before it could hold.

Shammy moved closer. Soft. Stabilizing. Even though she could barely stabilize herself.

"You told her," Shammy said.

"I told her part."

"The part that hurt."

"The part that was true."

Mai's hands were shaking harder now. Her framework had encountered data it couldn't process. Ace's fragments. The archive's attention. The possibility of Mai breaking, solving, dying, leaving.

"I need to understand," Mai said. Thin. "I need to know what it's showing you. I need to—"

"No." Ace stepped closer. Her hand found Mai's arm. Grounding. "You don't need to know. You want to know. Different."

"They're my possibilities."

"They're fragments. They're not real. Just the archive showing me what might happen."

"And you decided I shouldn't see them."

"Yes."

"That's not your choice."

"It is." Ace's grip tightened. "Because seeing them would make you move toward them. That's what analysis does. You try to understand, and understanding requires proximity. And I won't be the one who pushed you closer."

The archive room held its shape.

Three points. A triangle. Each of them carrying something they couldn't fully share.

Mai had her analytical framework, collapsed and rebuilding. Shammy had her destabilized core, barely holding form. Ace had the fragments, Mai's possibilities multiplying and branching, every path showing Mai changing.

And Mai knew. Now.

Not the specifics. Not the images. But she knew that the archive was showing Ace something about her. Something that made Ace protect her by keeping her distant.

"That's the weight," Mai said. Quiet. "The weight you're carrying. It's not about the archive. It's about me."

"Yes."

"And you think telling me will make it worse."

"Maybe."

"You don't know."

"I know enough."

Mai's analytical mind was still running. Ace could feel it. But something else was there too. Something underneath the analysis. Recognition.

"You're protecting me by keeping me in the dark," Mai said.

"Yes."

"That's not how the triad works."

"I know."

"That's how it breaks."

Ace's jaw tightened. "I know."

The archive sat in the center of the room. Patient. Curious. Waiting.

It had shown Ace something about Mai. It was watching to see what she would do with it.

Ace had told Mai part of the truth. The part that hurt. The part that acknowledged the burden without releasing it.

But the full truth, the fragments, the images, the branching paths, that truth stayed locked in Ace's chest. A weight she couldn't share. A burden she couldn't put down.

She could feel the distance growing. The gap between her and Mai. The space where the triad had been.

Not broken. Not yet.

But stretched. Thin.

Mai pulled away from Ace's grip. Not violently. Just movement. Distance. Her analytical framework needed space to process.

"I need to understand this," Mai said. "I need to know what the archive is doing. Why it's showing you fragments about me. What it wants."

"It doesn't want anything."

"That's not true. The archive has been analyzing us. Learning us. Showing us our own patterns back at us. There's a purpose."

"Maybe." Ace's voice came flat. "But I don't know what it is. And I'm not going to give you my fragments so you can try to figure it out."

"Because you think I'll break."

"Because I don't want to find out."

Mai's hands stopped shaking. Her framework had found something to hold onto. Not understanding. Not yet. But a question. A direction.

"You can't protect me forever," Mai said.

"I can try."

"That's not your job."

"It is." Ace stepped back. Returned to her perimeter. Her hand found her blade. "It's exactly my job."

Shammy watched from her position near the doorframe. Her presence flickered, storm and person, weather and body, but she held her shape.

"You're both right," Shammy said. Soft. Distant. "And you're both wrong."

Neither Ace nor Mai responded. They were standing at opposite ends of the room now. The triangle that had held them was stretching.

"Ace." Shammy's voice faded further. "You can't carry this alone. The fragments are already changing you. The distance is already growing. If you keep this secret, the triad will break. Not because Mai moves toward the archive, but because you move away from her."

"Mai." Shammy turned. "You can't analyze your way out of this. The fragments aren't data. They're possibility. They don't follow patterns you can map. If you try to understand them, you'll just keep hitting walls."

Shammy's voice faded. Her presence softened. Barely holding herself together.

"But I can't fix this," she said. "I can't stabilize it. I can't even hold my own edges. So whatever you two decide, you have to decide it."

The archive room was quiet.

Ace at the perimeter. Mai near her instruments. Shammy near the doorframe. Three points. A triangle. Barely holding.

The fragments kept coming. Ace could feel them. Mai's possibilities branching and multiplying. Every path showing Mai changing. Every possibility carrying weight.

Two choices.

Tell Mai everything. Give her the fragments. Let her try to understand. Risk Mai moving closer to the archive, closer to the thing that might break her.

Or keep carrying it. Alone. Let the distance grow. Let the triad fracture from the inside.

Neither right.

Neither wrong.

Just what existed.

Ace closed her eyes.

The fragments didn't stop. But she found the thinnest possibility. The one that barely existed. The path where she found a way to share without pushing Mai closer.

She didn't know if it was real.

She held onto it anyway.

"Tell me what you can," Mai said. Steady now. Not analytical. Just present. "Not everything. Just enough. So I know you're not disappearing."

Ace opened her eyes.

"The archive showed me you changing," she said. "Paths where you solve it. Paths where you break. Paths where you leave. Paths where you die. I can't stop the fragments. I can't unsee them. I can only decide what to do with them."

"And you decided to carry them."

"Until I can't."

"That's not sustainable."

"No."

Mai moved closer. Not all the way. Just toward. Her analytical framework had stopped trying to understand. She was just present.

"Then let me help carry them," she said. "Not by analyzing. Just by being here."

Ace's instinct: no. Protect her. Keep her distant.

Ace's wound: you can't. You're already breaking from the weight.

"Okay."

The triad held its shape.

Not fixed. Not solved. But still there. Three points. A triangle.

The archive watched. The fragments kept coming, Mai's possibilities branching and multiplying.

But now Ace had Mai. Not understanding. Not analyzing. Just present. Sharing the weight of knowing without saying.

It wasn't a solution.

Just a way to keep standing.

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