

Chapter 1: The Door That Shouldn't Exist

The cultist's blade missed by a finger's width.

Ace didn't react. Her katanas were already in motion—emerald arcs cutting through torchlight, precise, inevitable. The first cultist died still believing he had time to correct the thrust. His body followed through. His mind never caught up.

She pulled the blade free. He dropped without a sound.

They had been trained not to scream.

The temple smelled wrong.

Incense layered over copper. Over something older than blood. Stone that had absorbed too much of it, over too long a time. The walls were carved with symbols that refused to stay still if you looked at them too long. Torchlight made them crawl.

Four cultists.

No—three.

Mai's shot took the one on the left before Ace finished counting.

The disruptor didn't crack. It *sang*. A thin, high frequency that made teeth ache and thoughts narrow. The cultist folded where he stood, center mass collapse, clean.

"Ace."

Not urgency. Alignment.

Ace moved right.

The next cultist died mid-breath, his chant cutting off as steel slid between ribs. The blade found the space without hesitation. It always did.

Two left.

They didn't break. Didn't look at the bodies. Didn't acknowledge the fight.

They kept chanting.

The words were wrong. Too dense. They didn't travel through the air so much as settle into it.

"Ace." Mai again. Sharper now. "The circle."

Ace saw it.

Too late.

Not drawn—*cut* into the stone. Deep. Old. Filled with something that caught light that wasn't there. The blood wasn't decoration. It was placement.

Activation.

“Move—”

Reality tore.

Not open.

Wrong.

Edges that didn't belong to any geometry Ace understood. Light that wasn't light spilling through in colors that didn't resolve into anything her mind could hold. The chant peaked—perfect synchronization, perfect timing.

This had taken time.

Planning.

Lives.

The pull hit a fraction of a second later.

Not forward. Not down. Not anything with direction.

Just *away*.

Ace braced out of instinct, but there was nothing to push against. No opponent. No surface. Just the pull and the sensation that the world had lost agreement with itself.

Mai's hand locked around hers.

Not comfort.

Anchor.

The world folded.

—

Ace woke to heat.

Concrete beneath her. Warm. Vibrating faintly, like something massive moved somewhere below it. The smell hit a second later.

Garlic.

Oil.

Synthetic protein trying very hard to be something it wasn't.

Her stomach clenched.

Hungry.

That was wrong.

The temple. The portal. The—

Gone.

She opened her eyes.

Neon.

Not light—*layers* of it. Signs stacked over signs, colors bleeding into each other. Buildings that didn't end so much as dissolve into smog that glowed from within. The sky wasn't visible. Just a ceiling of reflected light.

A face leaned over her.

"You're hungry."

Ace blinked.

Mai's hair caught the neon, cycling pink, blue, gold. Her expression was steady. Too steady for this.

"Observation," Mai said. "Not concern. Your stomach is audible. Metabolic distress probability: high." A pause. "Also, you're lying in an alley. Urban density suggests major population center. The noodles smell acceptable."

Ace pushed herself up.

Everything responded. No breaks. No blood. The katanas were still there, weight familiar against her back.

"Where."

"I don't know."

Mai stood, brushing dust from her coat. Her hand hovered near the disruptor without committing to it.

"The portal functioned as a displacement mechanism," she continued. "Destination unknown. Temporal variance unknown." She looked up at the skyline. "Technological baseline... incompatible."

A man walked past them.

Chrome arm. Eyes that glowed from within. He didn't look at them.

Didn't slow.

Didn't care.

"The air," Ace said.

Mai tilted her head.

"Metal. Sweat. Ozone." Ace stood fully now. "And something underneath."

Mai's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Desperation," Ace said.

Mai didn't argue.

"You're not afraid," Mai noted.

"Should I be?"

"My models are failing."

"Good."

Mai blinked once. "Explain."

"You adapt faster when you stop trusting them."

Ace started walking.

Mai followed.

The alley spilled into a street that refused to sit still. Traffic without wheels. Light without source. People moving in patterns that made sense only to themselves.

Everything was loud.

Everything was alive.

Everything was wrong.

"My probabilities—" Mai began.

"Later."

Ace stopped.

Mai stopped because Ace did.

Someone stood in front of them.

Tall.

Taller than Mai. Taller than most of the people moving around them. The crowd bent around her without noticing it was doing so.

Silver-white hair that caught the neon and fractured it.

Eyes like the moment before lightning strikes.

She wasn't looking at the city.

She was looking at Ace.

Like she'd been waiting for something impossible—and it had just walked into view.

"Shammy," Ace said.

The name landed.

Something behind the woman's eyes shifted. Not breaking. Rebalancing. Like weight finally allowed to move.

"Fifty years."

Her voice held.

But it had edges now.

"Fifty years," Shammy said again. "I've been booking jobs for people who would have died in your first five minutes." A breath. Controlled. "And you show up exactly the same."

She stepped closer.

Her hand stopped just short of touching them. Hovering in the space between, like she needed proof that space still meant something.

"I knew you'd come back."

A fracture in the voice.

Gone as quickly as it appeared.

"I always knew."

—

The apartment was too small.

Not physically.

Functionally.

Two rooms. Bare essentials. Everything placed with intent, not comfort.

The chair in the corner didn't fit.

Ace noticed it immediately.

Not because it was unusual.

Because it was *unused*.

Positioned. Waiting.

Shammy saw where she was looking.

Didn't comment.

Turned to the kitchen surface instead. Water. Heat. Routine.

"Explain," Ace said.

"Fifty years," Shammy replied, back still turned. "You disappeared in the portal. I tried to follow. It collapsed."

“When.”

“2077. Night City.” A gesture toward the window. Neon leaking through glass. “You’ve been gone fifty years.”

Mai stood at the window, one hand flat against the glass.

“Temporal displacement with differential flow,” she murmured. “My models—”

“—don’t matter,” Shammy cut in.

She turned.

Her eyes were stormlight now.

“You’re here,” she said. “That’s what matters.”

Mai shifted. “You didn’t move on.”

Not judgment.

Just data.

Shammy smiled.

It didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“I built a life,” she said. “Contacts. Work. Reputation.” A small, dry laugh. “And a chair.”

Silence.

The chair carried its own weight.

Ace moved.

Straight past her.

Too close.

Familiar in a way that didn’t ask permission.

She adjusted the heat under the water.

“Too hot,” Ace said.

Shammy froze.

“Gunpowder green. You always overboiled it.”

A beat.

“You remember that.”

“Three minutes. Not boiling.”

Shammy didn't move.

"Four days," she said quietly. "I complained for four days."

"Four."

Ace measured the leaves. Same container. Same smell.

Some things hadn't changed.

The water settled.

Steam—not violent, not breaking.

Correct.

She poured.

Two cups.

Then a third.

Set them down.

"Sit."

Shammy hesitated.

"The chair—"

"Bed."

Simple.

Shammy sat.

Mai stayed by the window.

Ace took the floor.

Cross-legged.

Like always.

Fifty years pressed into the room.

Not spoken.

Not needed.

Shammy lifted the cup.

Her hands shook.

Barely.

Enough.

“It’s good,” she said.

“I know.”

A pause.

Then—

a laugh.

The right one.

Soft.

Familiar.

Alive.

“Okay,” Shammy said, standing. “I’ll show you.”

“The city,” Ace said.

“The city.” Shammy nodded. “What I built. What I became.”

“And then,” Mai added.

Shammy looked at her.

“We figure out what comes next.”

A hand on Mai’s shoulder.

Brief.

Grounding.

Ace stood.

The katanas shifted against her back.

Still there.

Still real.

“The chair,” Ace said.

Shammy stilled.

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

Not forgiveness.

Not resolution.

Just acknowledgment.

They stepped out.

—

The hallway smelled processed.

Air filtered too many times.

Chemical edges.

Shammy moved through it without thinking.

Familiar.

Owned.

“You live here,” Mai said.

“Yes. Heywood.” A pause. “District. One of many.”

She stopped herself.

“Explain anyway,” Ace said.

Shammy exhaled.

“People modify themselves here. Bodies. Minds. Hardware upgrades.” A small gesture toward her own arm. “I didn’t go that far.”

They hit the street.

The city slammed into them.

Sound.

Light.

Motion.

Too much.

“Stay close,” Shammy said.

“We don’t look lost,” Mai said.

“You do.”

A flicker of amusement.

Real this time.

“That man’s arm is a flamethrower,” Shammy added.

Ace hadn’t noticed.

“What do we do?” Mai asked.

“We go to the Afterlife.”

Shammy didn’t slow.

“It’s where work lives. You’ll need work. Nothing here is free.”

“Work,” Ace echoed.

“Jobs. Fixers run them. I’m one.”

Ace watched her.

The way she moved.

The way the crowd parted.

“You became someone,” Ace said.

Shammy didn’t answer immediately.

“I had to,” she said finally. “You weren’t here.”

Truth.

No decoration.

They stopped in front of a building.

THE AFTERLIFE burned in neon above the door.

“Let me talk first,” Shammy said. Then, quieter—“And... thank you. For coming back.”

She didn’t wait.

Went inside.

Ace looked at Mai.

Mai was already calculating.

“Her emotional output was—”

“She kept the tea,” Ace said.

Mai stopped.

“What?”

“Fifty years. Same leaves.”

The numbers dropped out of Mai's eyes.

"She waited," Mai said.

"Yes."

Ace pushed the door open.

Sound hit first. Then light. Then people.

Deals. Noise. Energy.

Life.

Mai followed.

Shammy was already moving through it like she belonged.

Because she did.

Fifty years.

Ace stepped fully inside.

Hungry.

Not alone.

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