



## Chapter 2 — Floodlights and Phantom Drafts

The city thinned out the way a crowd thins out after a fire alarm—slowly, reluctantly, and with a weird shame that it had ever been loud in the first place.

Ace drove. She didn't look like someone who should be behind the wheel of anything heavier than a shopping cart, but she handled the car like it was an extension of her spine: small inputs, no wasted motion. The windshield wipers kept time with the rain, a metronome for an evening that was trying very hard to act ordinary.

Mai sat angled slightly toward the passenger window, not because she wanted to watch the dark go by, but because watching meant mapping. Her gaze tracked fences, service roads, the geometry of overpasses. She had the disruptor pistol resting in her lap beneath a folded jacket, and her fingers tapped the weapon's casing at irregular intervals—quiet checks, the way some people check their pulse.

They didn't talk much. When they did, it was the kind of dialogue that wasn't conversation so much as calibration.

"You're favoring your left," Mai said.

Ace shrugged. "Am I?"

"Yes."

Ace paused a beat, then shifted her posture with the barest grimace. "So you did want padding."

Mai's mouth twitched. "I want you not leaking on municipal property."

Ace exhaled through her nose. The closest thing she did to laughter these days.

The map marker Bright sent led them off the main road and down a narrow service lane lined with battered birches and sagging wire fence. Somewhere to the right, unseen water moved—slow, heavy, kept in place by concrete walls built by people who had believed in the idea of control.

A chain-link gate appeared in the headlights.

It was locked. Of course it was locked.

A sign hung crookedly: MUNICIPAL INFRASTRUCTURE — AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. Someone had added a smiley face underneath with black marker, years ago, and the marker had bled into the metal like the sign was sweating.

Mai looked at the padlock. "We're authorized."

Ace didn't argue. She slipped out, rain soaking her hood immediately, and walked to the gate. She didn't cut the chain. She didn't break the lock.

She simply took the lock in her hand, breathed out once, and turned it in a way locks weren't meant to turn. The metal complained quietly—an embarrassed squeal—then the shackle popped.

Mai watched without comment, but her eyes did that thing they did when she was taking notes internally: not surprised, just filing.

Ace swung the gate open. It groaned like it hated being asked to move.

They drove through and closed it behind them. Mai relocked it—because leaving a place open was an invitation, and tonight they were in the business of declining invitations.

The annex sat low and ugly against the treeline: a squat concrete building with a flat roof, floodlights mounted on poles, and a vent stack that rose like a blunt finger. The floodlights were on, but one of them flickered in a tired rhythm, as if it couldn't decide whether the world was worth illuminating.

Ace parked in a strip of cracked asphalt near a row of rusted maintenance lockers. As the engine died, silence pooled around them, thickened by rain. Far away, a pump station throbbed with that steady industrial heartbeat that normally made places like this feel safe.

Normally.

Mai stepped out first this time. Not because she was afraid, but because she was anchoring. She stood still for a breath and let her senses—technical, ritual, intuitive in that weird hybrid way she had—taste the air.

Ace got out and shut her door quietly. Her hand drifted to the strap across her chest. The katanas responded the way they always did when something interesting was nearby: a low, patient warmth.

Mai's head turned slightly. "Smell it?"

Ace breathed in. There it was. Clean metal. Battery-split. Something sterile pretending to be neutral.

"Yeah," Ace said. "Same."

Mai's voice dropped. "This isn't random."

"No."

They walked toward the building, boots splashing in shallow puddles, floodlight glare flattening their shadows. The annex door was heavy steel with a keypad entry and a camera mounted above it.

Mai looked up at the camera.

The camera looked back.

For a second, Ace had the distinct sensation that the camera wasn't recording. It was watching.

Mai didn't reach for the keypad. She reached into her bag and pulled out a small handheld unit—an ugly little brick with a screen and a coil antenna. She held it out, thumbed it on.

The screen lit with a thin green line, then a scatter of noise.

Mai frowned. "That's... not supposed to be there."

Ace leaned closer. The noise wasn't just noise. It had structure. A pattern that almost looked like a pulse.

Mai's jaw tightened. "We have a field."

Ace's voice stayed flat. "Seam."

Mai nodded once. "Seam."

She stepped up to the keypad, punched in the access code Bright had given them. The keypad accepted it with a cheerful beep that felt wrong in the rain.

The door clicked.

Ace didn't move immediately. Neither did Mai. They both listened, because opening doors was how things started.

Nothing screamed. Nothing lunged.

But from somewhere inside the annex—deep, muffled—there came a sound like a toolbox drawer sliding shut.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "There's someone in there."

Ace's head tilted. "Or something rehearsing being someone."

Mai's hand hovered over the door handle. "Remember what he said."

Ace nodded. "Don't answer doors that aren't doors."

Mai shot her a look.

Ace added, almost deadpan, "It's good advice."

Mai opened the door.

The air inside was warmer than outside and smelled like old concrete, damp insulation, and... that metallic clean note, faint but persistent. The hallway was narrow, lit by overhead fluorescents that made everything look slightly sick.

A row of framed safety posters lined the wall:

LOCK OUT / TAG OUT REPORT HAZARDS SAFETY IS EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY

Ace's eyes lingered on that last one for half a second too long. Responsibility. Guilt. Words that liked to dress up as rules.

Mai moved in first, disruptor pistol now in hand. Ace followed, silent, the kind of quiet that wasn't stealth so much as refusal to waste sound.

The annex was simple: a hallway, a maintenance room, a stairwell down to the flood infrastructure below. The kind of place you could map in thirty seconds and forget forever.

If it behaved.

Mai stopped by the first door on the left. A small plaque read ELECTRICAL.

She didn't open it. She pressed her palm lightly against the door instead, eyes unfocusing as if she was listening through her skin.

Ace watched. Mai's "ritual intuition" wasn't chanting or candles. It was pattern recognition turned into a sixth sense.

Mai's fingers twitched. "It's... humming."

Ace's eyes sharpened. "Like the alley."

Mai nodded.

Something shifted behind them—soft, almost inaudible. A weight change. The sense of a presence moving in a space where nothing should move.

Ace turned.

The hallway behind them was empty.

But the fluorescent lights above flickered once.

Mai's disruptor gave a small involuntary whine, like a dog hearing a pitch too high for humans.

Mai's voice stayed calm. "We're being tracked."

Ace's jaw set. "From where?"

Mai raised the handheld unit again. The green line on the screen spiked, dropped, spiked again—like a heartbeat trying to synchronize with theirs.

Mai looked up slowly, eyes tracing the ceiling.

"There," she said, and pointed.

A seam in the ceiling tiles. Just a line. Just a shadow. Except it wasn't aligned with the tiles' grid. It ran at a slightly wrong angle, subtle enough that a tired maintenance worker would never notice.

Ace stared at it.

Her skin prickled.

Inside her, Violet stirred—not with voice, not with words, but with a faint pressure that said: this is familiar.

Mai's gaze didn't leave the seam. "Ace."

Ace blinked. "Yeah."

Mai's tone sharpened. "Don't stare into it."

Ace looked away, immediately. Not because she was obedient, but because Mai had earned the right to be obeyed.

Mai reached into her bag and pulled out a small canister—silver, palm-sized, marked with Foundation tape and a red warning band. She twisted the cap and shook it once.

Ace watched her hands. "Marking?"

Mai nodded. "If it's active, we mark it. Bright wants confirmation."

She sprayed the canister toward the ceiling seam. A fine mist dispersed, then clung to the air like dust caught in light—except it wasn't dust. It was a reactive particulate that highlighted energetic distortion.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then the mist bent.

Not much. Just enough to reveal that the air near the seam wasn't following the same rules as the rest of the hallway. It curved toward the line like iron filings toward a magnet.

Mai exhaled slowly. "Confirmed."

Ace's eyes tracked the bend. "It's pulling."

Mai's voice went quieter. "It's listening."

Ace didn't like the word.

Mai reached for her comms earpiece and tapped it twice. "Bright."

Static answered first. Then his voice, too clear to be comfortable. "Talk to me."

Mai didn't waste time. "Confirmed seam activity. Same signature as earlier. Ceiling plane distortion, reactive particulate bending. There's a pulse on the handheld unit that syncs with proximity."

Bright swore softly. "That's fast."

Ace spoke into the open line, because if Bright was listening, this mattered. "We feel watched."

Bright didn't joke this time. "You are."

Mai's eyes sharpened. "From where."

Bright paused just long enough to be honest. "I don't know yet. But the annex shouldn't be generating that pattern on its own. It's either a node... or bait."

Ace's fingers flexed around the strap of her harness. "Which."

Bright's voice went thin. "Both, maybe."

Mai's face didn't change, but her posture did—slightly tighter, slightly more protective. "We're leaving."

Bright didn't argue. "Yes. Mark it thoroughly, get out. Do not go downstairs."

Ace's gaze slid toward the stairwell door at the end of the hallway. A small sign above it read LOWER ACCESS — AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

The stairwell door handle was wet. Not with rain.

With condensation, fresh, like it had been breathed on.

Mai saw it too.

She didn't speak. She simply stepped between Ace and the stairwell, the disruptor now angled down the hallway like a line drawn in ink.

Ace felt Violet again—quiet, tense, like something in her chest had leaned forward.

Then—

From the stairwell door, came a sound.

Not a knock.

Not a bang.

A sound like a door unlocking from the inside.

Then a second sound, immediately after, softer:

A careful inhale. A human one.

Mai didn't move.

Ace didn't move.

The fluorescent lights flickered twice, and in the second flicker, the crack under the stairwell door looked... wider.

Not physically. Not like wood warped.

Like the darkness under it had opened its mouth.

Mai's voice was so low it barely qualified as sound. "Don't answer it."

Ace's eyes stayed on the door. Her tone was flat, but there was something sharp underneath. "We didn't ask it anything."

Mai's grip tightened on the disruptor. "That's the point."

On the other side of the stairwell door, something shifted closer—slow, careful, rehearsing weight.

And then, with almost comical precision, the sound came again:

A door opening.

Not this door. Not the steel door in front of them.

The sound of a different door. A wooden door. The kind you'd have in an apartment. The kind you'd open for someone you knew.

The sound was wrong in this concrete annex. Wrong like laughter in a morgue.

Ace's spine went cold.

Because the sound wasn't just sound.

It carried a feeling with it.

The feeling of home.

Mai swore under her breath—one sharp word in Finnish, clean and bitter. Then she spoke into the comms, voice steady.

"Bright. It's doing the door imitation."

Bright's reply was immediate. "Leave. Now. Do not run. Do not engage. Get back to the car."

Mai nodded once, as if Bright could see. She gestured with her chin toward the exit.

Ace moved with her—two steps, three—controlled. Not panicked.

Behind them, the stairwell door handle turned.

Slowly.

A fraction at a time.

As if whatever was inside didn't want to scare them yet.

As if it wanted them to choose to come back.

Mai didn't look over her shoulder. She didn't give it the courtesy.

Ace did, once—just a glance, the kind you'd throw at a blade to check its edge.

In that glance, she saw nothing.

But she felt something on the other side of the door lean closer to the crack.

And she felt Violet go perfectly still.

Not asleep.

Not calm.

Still the way a predator goes still when it recognizes a scent.

Mai's hand found Ace's wrist again, a light clamp—anchor pressure.

"Eyes forward," Mai murmured.

Ace obeyed.

They walked toward the exit like professionals.

Behind them, the annex hallway lights flickered one more time.

And in the flicker, the stairwell door was open a hand's width.

Just enough for darkness to breathe out.

Just enough for the annex to smell, suddenly, like clean metal...

...and a place you miss.

They did not run.

They did not answer.

They left.

And the seam, patient as hunger, watched them go.

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