



Chapter 3 — Wet Asphalt, Dry Jokes

Outside, the rain hit them like the world trying to wash its hands.

The floodlights painted everything the same cheap white: puddles, fence posts, wet leaves. Their car sat where they left it, a dark, ordinary shape pretending it belonged to a normal night.

Ace didn't sprint. Mai didn't either. They moved with that slow certainty that said we are not prey, even if something would like us to be.

Behind them, the annex door didn't slam. It closed softly.

Like a person being polite.

Ace's fingers twitched once near her strap. Mai noticed, because Mai noticed everything that mattered.

"Don't," Mai murmured.

Ace kept walking. "I wasn't going to."

"Yes you were."

Ace's mouth quirked. "Maybe a little."

Mai gave her a look that would have made a lesser human apologize and take up knitting.

Ace opened the driver's door. The interior smelled like damp fabric and their own adrenaline, faintly sweet and wrong. She slid in, started the engine, and let it idle for a second.

Mai got in and shut the door. Quiet. Controlled. Then she exhaled like she'd been holding the tension in her jaw instead of her lungs.

Ace backed out. Tires hissed on wet asphalt.

For a handful of seconds they drove without speaking, headlights sliding over fence wire and puddles. The gate came back into view.

Ace slowed as they approached it, and for a moment, the world narrowed to the chain-link and the padlock Mai had reattached.

Mai's hand went automatically to her bag. "I'll—"

Ace cut her off with a small gesture. "Sit."

Mai blinked. "Excuse me?"

Ace's eyes stayed on the gate. "Sit. I already violated municipal property once tonight. Might as well make it a theme."

Mai snorted, despite herself. "Your themes are always destructive."

Ace leaned out the window, reached the lock, and did the same quiet violence as before: a twist, a complaint of metal, then the shackle popped.

Mai watched, lips pressed together like she was trying not to smile at someone's terrible behavior because it was effective.

Ace swung the gate open with the car's bumper—gentle, like she was nudging a cow. Drove through. Stopped. Got out, closed it again, and relocked it with two sharp movements.

Mai stared. "You're relocking it."

Ace climbed back in, rain dripping off her hood. "Yes."

Mai's tone was flat. "Why."

Ace started forward. "Because if something wants out, it can earn it."

Mai's mouth twitched. "You're going to get us killed by stubbornness."

Ace shrugged. "Not my worst way to die."

"That's not comforting."

“It’s honest.”

Mai leaned back in her seat and finally let herself laugh—small, brief, sharp. It didn’t fix anything. It made the fear less tidy, which somehow helped.

They rejoined the service lane. The trees pressed close, branches dripping. The hum of the pump station faded behind them like an animal settling back into sleep.

Ace kept her eyes on the road. But her mind stayed half a step behind, replaying the sound.

The door.

Not the steel one. The other one. The one that carried the sensation of home, of familiarity, of come on, just for a second.

Violet remained silent in the deepest part of her. Not sleeping. Not calm. Just... still, in a way that made Ace feel like she was sharing her ribs with a careful stranger.

Mai broke the quiet first. “It tried to sell us nostalgia.”

Ace’s eyebrows lifted slightly. “That’s a new sentence.”

“It’s accurate.”

Ace nodded once. “Yeah. It’s accurate.”

Mai’s fingers tapped her disruptor casing again—irregular, deliberate. “It didn’t want to scare us.”

Ace’s voice was flat, but her hands tightened on the wheel. “It wanted us to choose.”

Mai glanced at her. “You’re not choosing.”

Ace made a sound that was halfway between a scoff and agreement. “I don’t choose things that smell like batteries and bad decisions.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “That’s most of your life.”

Ace deadpanned. “And yet, here you are.”

Mai’s lips curved. “Unfortunately.”

Ace’s phone vibrated on the console. She didn’t look at it immediately. She waited until the vibration stopped, then picked it up and answered.

“Bright,” she said.

“Still alive?” Bright’s voice again, like a man who kept a running tally out of spite.

Mai leaned in toward the speaker. “Marked and confirmed. Active seam, non-local distortion. The imitation event triggered at the stairwell.”

Bright exhaled. “You left?”

Ace glanced at Mai, then back to the road. “We left.”

“Good,” Bright said, and there was a hint of genuine relief buried under the sarcasm. “Any pursuit?”

Mai’s gaze flicked to the rear-view mirror. Nothing but wet road and darkness. “Not visible.”

Ace added, almost casually, “But it watched.”

Bright didn’t argue. “Yes. That’s what these do when they’re learning your edges.”

Mai’s tone sharpened. “Don’t call it ‘these’ like you have a whole shelf of them.”

Bright paused. “I have... a few shelves. I’m not proud.”

Ace muttered, “He says, proudly.”

Bright either ignored it or pretended to. “Listen. I’m pulling data from the annex sensors. The pattern you described—if it’s syncing to proximity, it’s not just a leak. It’s a hook. A handshake attempt.”

Mai’s knuckles went pale on her disruptor. “Handshake implies mutual.”

Bright’s voice darkened a notch. “Exactly.”

Ace said, “What does it want.”

Bright hesitated, which was never a good sign with him. “I don’t know. But the ‘door’ thing? That’s not random. That’s a behavioral lure. It picked a human comfort sound because it’s trying to normalize itself in your head.”

Mai’s jaw tightened. “It won’t.”

Bright gave a soft hum. “I’m sure it won’t. You’re both paragons of discipline.”

Ace’s tone was dry. “We are.”

Mai’s eyes cut to Ace. “We’re not.”

Ace didn’t blink. “Speak for yourself.”

Mai sighed. “Ace.”

Bright jumped in like he could hear the look Mai was giving. “I want you back at safehouse. No extra stops. And I want you to write down the sensory impressions, verbatim, while they’re fresh. Smell, sound, pressure, emotional bleed-through. Especially the emotional bleed-through.”

Ace’s fingers tightened on the wheel again. “It was... home.”

Bright’s voice softened. “Yeah. That’s the dangerous part.”

Mai spoke quietly. “We didn’t answer.”

Bright’s tone went dry again, a man reapplying his mask. “You didn’t answer. I’m almost disappointed. I was ready to yell at you.”

Ace said, “Save it for a special occasion.”

“Oh, I will,” Bright replied. “I live for special occasions.”

Mai tilted her head slightly. “And that mist bend—your particulate. It acted like gravity toward the seam.”

Bright’s reply was immediate. “Send me the readings.”

Mai glanced at Ace. “We have them?”

Ace’s mouth twitched. “Mai took them.”

Mai blinked. “I did.”

Ace drove one-handed for a second and gestured vaguely at Mai with the other. “See? Competence.”

Mai stared at her. “You’re insufferable.”

Ace nodded. “It’s my charm.”

Bright laughed. “Okay. You’re still you. That’s good. Ping me when you’re inside. And Ace?”

Ace’s voice went flat. “What.”

Bright’s tone shifted, careful now. “If you get another ‘tap’ on your phone that isn’t a notification—don’t ignore it. Log it. Time, frequency, pattern. It’s trying to create a private channel.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “Can it?”

Bright didn’t answer quickly. Which was answer enough.

Ace said, “Noted.”

They ended the call.

The main road returned. The city’s outer skin showed up again: street lamps, occasional cars, a bus shelter with a poster peeling off like dead bark.

Ace drove with steady precision. Mai watched the mirrors, then the dark between the trees, then the dashboard reflection in the windshield—searching for a second set of eyes.

Nothing followed.

But the absence didn’t feel like safety.

It felt like patience.

After ten minutes, Ace spoke without looking over. “That ‘home’ thing...”

Mai answered just as quietly. “It wasn’t yours.”

Ace’s jaw tightened. “No.”

Mai’s voice stayed calm, anchoring. “It was generic. Like a template. Like it pulled the concept of ‘home’ from a human manual.”

Ace exhaled. “So it’s learning.”

Mai nodded. "And it's not stupid."

Ace's eyes remained forward. "Great."

Mai's lips curved faintly. "You wanted a theme."

Ace snorted. "This is a bad theme."

Mai's gaze softened, but her tone stayed sharp—her version of affection in a crisis. "We'll write it down. We'll box it. We don't let it live in our heads rent-free."

Ace flicked her a sideways glance. "You charge rent now?"

Mai met her eyes. "Always."

Ace's mouth pulled into a small, genuine smile. "Good."

The safehouse came into view as a set of ordinary buildings that looked like nothing at all—exactly the point. Ace took the turns the way she always did: not direct, not paranoid, just intelligently inconvenient. A loop. A check. A pause to watch a reflection.

No tail.

She parked under a dim light that buzzed like it hated its job.

Inside, the air was warmer. Drier. The smell of damp clothes and metal weapons and that faint antiseptic Mai always carried. The place wasn't home.

But it was theirs.

Mai hung her jacket. Ace dropped her harness onto the table with a careful thud and unshouldered her blades, laying them down like you'd set down two living things you trusted not to bite.

Mai caught the smallest green pulse along the katana edges. "They're awake."

Ace didn't look at them. "They heard it."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "They heard what."

Ace's throat tightened a fraction. She could feel Violet again, that impossible stillness.

"The imitation," Ace said. "The idea of 'open the door.'"

Mai's gaze hardened. "Then we don't."

Ace nodded once. "We don't."

Mai pulled out a notebook—actual paper, because some things shouldn't be digital—and a pen. She sat at the table like she was about to do math.

"Raw data," Mai said.

Ace's mouth twitched. "You're copying me."

Mai didn't look up. "It's a good method."

Ace leaned back against the wall, arms folded, eyes half-lidded—but not relaxed. “Fine. Raw data.”

Mai tapped the pen. “Start.”

Ace stared at the ceiling for a moment, as if she could still see the wrong seam line there.

“Smell,” she said. “Clean metal. Like a battery cracked open. Not ozone. Not burning. Clean.”

Mai wrote, quick and neat.

Ace continued. “Pressure. Bone-deep. Like a hand resting on a piano key. Not pressing. Waiting.”

Mai’s pen scratched.

Ace paused, then forced herself to say the next part plainly. “Emotional bleed-through. ‘Home.’ Not mine. Not real. Template-feeling.”

Mai’s pen slowed, then resumed.

Ace added, quieter: “The phone tap. Before we left.”

Mai looked up sharply. “That was there too.”

Ace nodded once.

Mai’s eyes went cold-focus again—architect mode, anchor mode. “We log it. And we lock down devices.”

Ace’s mouth curved faintly. “You’re going to yell at my phone.”

Mai didn’t blink. “Yes.”

Ace sighed. “Okay.”

Mai finished writing, set the pen down, and looked at Ace with that calm violence she used to keep the world in line.

“We did it clean,” Mai said.

Ace nodded. “We did.”

Mai’s lips twitched. “And you relocked the gate.”

Ace shrugged. “I did.”

Mai stared at her a beat longer, then—finally—let herself smile.

“You’re ridiculous,” Mai said.

Ace’s eyes softened. “You like it.”

Mai’s smile turned sharp. “Sometimes.”

Ace pushed off the wall and stepped closer, just enough for her presence to touch Mai’s field—her calm, her clarity.

“Next test gig?” Ace asked.

Mai’s smile faded back into seriousness. “Next test gig.”

Ace nodded slowly. “It’s not a gig.”

Mai’s eyes held hers. “No. It’s a pattern.”

Ace’s fingers brushed the katana hilts once—light, almost affectionate, like checking on sisters who didn’t need comforting.

Outside, the rain continued.

Inside, the safehouse felt solid.

But in the back of Ace’s awareness—quiet as a breath she didn’t remember taking—something seemed to listen.

Not inside the room.

Not on the street.

Somewhere between.

A seam.

Patient as hunger.

And now, documented. Marked. Refused.

For tonight.

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Last update: **17/03/2026 17:53**

