



Chapter 4 — Paper Shields

Mai treated the safehouse like a problem that could be tightened with the right screws.

She didn't pace. She didn't spiral. She organized—which, for Mai, was the closest thing to anger the universe was allowed to witness.

Ace watched from the kitchen doorway with a mug of aggressively mediocre instant coffee. The kind that tasted like "you're awake now, congratulations, suffer." She didn't complain. Complaining was energy. She was saving her energy for whatever had tried to sell them a fake door.

Mai laid out their devices on the table like evidence: two phones, two comms earpieces, one handheld sensor unit, a small portable recorder, and a tiny Foundation-issued brick the size of a cigarette pack with a single switch labeled HARD LINE.

Ace squinted at the label. "That's subtle."

Mai didn't look up. "Subtle gets you watched."

Ace took a sip and winced slightly, as if the coffee had personally insulted her. “We’re already watched.”

Mai snapped a Faraday pouch open with one hand—black fabric, metallic inner lining, ugly and effective. “We’re watched on purpose, and we’re watched by accident. I’m removing the accidents.”

Ace’s mouth twitched. “You’re going to punish my phone.”

“Yes.”

Ace leaned closer. “It didn’t even do anything.”

Mai shot her a look that could cut glass. “It vibrated without a notification.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed, the humor thinning into focus. “It tapped.”

Mai nodded once. “It tapped. And Bright said that’s a handshake attempt.”

Ace took another sip, because if she stopped moving her mouth her head would replay the stairwell sound again. “So what’s the plan.”

Mai flipped open her notebook and pointed with the pen. “Plan is: we stop pretending this is just ‘things we saw.’ We treat it like a process.”

Ace’s expression turned faintly blank. “I don’t like processes.”

Mai’s lips curved, sharp. “You are a process.”

Ace blinked slowly. “That’s rude.”

“It’s accurate.”

Ace’s eyes flicked to the katanas on the table. The blades sat quiet, but not asleep—two emerald pulses under the wraps, like a heartbeat you only heard when you didn’t want to.

Mai caught the glance. “Weapons stay here while we lock down devices.”

Ace’s brows rose. “You want me unarmed.”

Mai’s gaze was calm, unwavering. “I want you not feeding it a signal trail.”

Ace stared at her for a beat longer. Then, because this was Mai, and because Mai had earned it a thousand times, Ace nodded once.

“Okay,” she said. “Do your architect thing.”

Mai’s shoulders loosened a fraction—barely visible, but Ace saw it. She always saw the small things. The small things were usually the only honest ones.

Mai started with the obvious: phones off, batteries out where possible, SIMs removed, devices sealed into Faraday pouches.

Ace watched her strip her own phone like a surgeon removing an organ. “You’re brutal.”

Mai didn’t glance up. “You’re sentimental.”

Ace made a quiet noise that could've been a laugh or a protest. "I'm not sentimental."

Mai's pen paused mid-scratch. "You called the coffee 'aggressively mediocre' like it has feelings."

Ace stared. "That's not sentiment. That's critique."

Mai's lips twitched. "Sure."

They worked in silence for a few minutes—Mai sealing, logging, marking times; Ace cleaning the table with a cloth she found, purely to have something to do with her hands that wasn't gripping a katana hilt.

Then Ace's phone vibrated.

Inside the Faraday pouch.

It was a dull, muffled thump—like a heartbeat against cloth.

Both of them froze.

Mai's eyes lifted very, very slowly to the pouch. Then to Ace.

Ace's face did not change, but the air around her did. The silent-pressure aura that usually stayed tucked close slid outward a hair, like a blade coming half an inch out of its sheath.

Mai didn't touch the pouch.

She didn't open it.

She didn't even flinch.

She just said, calmly, "It shouldn't be able to do that."

Ace's voice was flat. "It did."

Mai's fingers tightened around the pen. "Again."

The pouch thumped a second time. Slightly different rhythm.

Not random.

Patterned.

Ace's throat went dry. In the back of her awareness, Violet went still—so still it felt like someone holding their breath inside her.

Mai reached for the portable recorder, clicked it on, and placed it next to the pouch. "Timestamp," she murmured. "Now."

Ace looked at the clock on the microwave. "02:17."

Mai nodded once. "Let it finish."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "You want to—"

Mai cut her off with a look. Not harsh. Just immovable. "We're not answering. We're recording."

Ace's mouth quirked. "You're baiting it."

Mai's tone remained calm, which was worse than fear. "No. I'm refusing to be blind."

The pouch thumped again. Then again.

Four taps.

Pause.

Two taps.

Pause.

One.

Mai's pen moved on paper: 4-2-1.

Ace's pulse ticked in her jaw. "Is that... a code."

Mai's eyes didn't leave the pouch. "It's trying to be one."

Ace's voice went quiet. "We don't teach it."

Mai's pen stopped. "We don't teach it," she agreed. "But we do log what it tries."

Ace leaned back against the counter, arms folded, as if posture could keep the seam from crawling under her skin. "It's rude."

Mai's mouth twitched again, almost unwilling. "Yes."

Ace stared at the pouch like it had personally insulted her. "Tell it to stop."

Mai finally looked up. "Ace."

Ace blinked once. "Joke."

Mai didn't fully smile, but the tension in the room shifted a notch. "Good. Keep joking. It helps your nervous system remember we're still human."

Ace's eyes softened, just briefly. "You're really good at that."

Mai looked away immediately—because praise made her uncomfortable unless it was disguised as strategy. "Call Bright."

Ace glanced at the pouch. "Phone's sealed."

Mai tapped the Foundation brick labeled HARD LINE. "Use that."

Ace picked up the brick, flipped the switch. A tiny LED lit. No touchscreen. No apps. No friendly interface. It was the kind of device designed by people who'd been burned by convenience.

Ace spoke into it. "Bright."

Static. Then: "If this is about your coffee, I'm not your therapist."

Mai leaned in, voice crisp. "Our phones are tapping inside Faraday pouches. Patterned. Timestamp 02:17. Recording active."

There was a long pause on Bright's end.

Too long.

Then, quietly: "Okay."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "That's not a normal 'okay.'"

Bright exhaled. "No. It's not."

Mai's tone sharpened. "Explain."

Bright didn't joke this time. "If the pouch is properly sealed, and you're sure it is—then whatever is doing this isn't using standard RF. It's... piggybacking on something else. Something closer to the seam than to the device."

Ace's voice was flat, but it carried steel. "Meaning it can tap us even if we unplug."

Bright's reply was careful. "Meaning it can reach. Not everywhere. Not always. But enough that you should assume it's probing your boundary conditions."

Mai's jaw tightened. "What do we do?"

Bright answered immediately, as if he'd already decided. "You stop staying in one place."

Ace blinked. "That's your advice?"

Bright's voice went dry. "It's my emergency advice. If it's localized, moving breaks the handshake. If it's attached to you, moving gives me more data."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "So we're lab rats."

Bright sighed. "You're professionals in a world that keeps trying to become a mouth. Don't make me romantic about it."

Ace muttered, "Too late."

Bright continued, clipped now. "I'm sending you a second test site. Not a breach, not a fight. A check. I want to know if the tapping continues when you're in a clean environment."

Mai's tone turned skeptical. "Clean."

Bright's voice went darker. "As clean as I can arrange on short notice."

A ping came through on the HARD LINE. Mai leaned in and read the coordinates off the tiny monochrome display.

"University annex?" Mai said.

Bright confirmed. "Deep storage. Manuscript archive. Climate-controlled, shielded, isolated from

municipal infrastructure. People complain about cold spots and missing keys. Again: boring on paper.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “And off paper.”

Bright paused. “Off paper, there was a door sound on security audio last week. Wooden. Domestic. Wrong.”

Mai went very still.

Ace’s mouth became a thin line. “It’s repeating.”

Bright didn’t deny it. “Yes.”

Mai asked the question that mattered. “Any staff inside right now.”

Bright replied, “No. It’s locked down. Foundation liaison says the night guard called in sick after hearing something ‘trying to come in through the intercom.’”

Ace exhaled once, slow. “Okay.”

Bright’s voice sharpened. “Same rules. You confirm whether the tapping pattern changes inside the archive, you log it, you leave. No heroics.”

Ace’s tone was dry. “No chasing nostalgia into basements.”

Mai’s eyes flicked to Ace. “Correct.”

Bright sounded relieved despite himself. “Ping me on arrival. And—Mai?”

Mai answered. “Yes.”

Bright hesitated. “Don’t let Ace get bored.”

Ace leaned toward the brick. “I heard that.”

Bright laughed once, thin. “Good.”

The call cut.

The safehouse felt smaller afterwards. Not because it had changed, but because they now knew the seam could reach through cloth and metal and the illusion of safety.

Mai capped her pen and closed the notebook with deliberate care. Then she looked at Ace.

“Shoes,” Mai said. “Jackets. We move.”

Ace nodded, already pulling her harness back on. “Do we bring the katanas.”

Mai hesitated half a second—just long enough for Ace to feel it.

Then Mai said, firmly, “Yes. We’re not proving points. We’re staying alive.”

Ace’s mouth quirked. “You’re learning my love language.”

Mai rolled her eyes. “Don’t.”

Ace lifted her blades and settled them into place. The emerald glow pulsed faintly, like they approved.

Mai shoved the Faraday pouches into her bag, recorder still running. “If it taps again, we have comparative data.”

Ace opened the door.

Rain had eased to a drizzle. The street looked washed and innocent. Cars sat parked like sleeping animals. A distant siren wailed and then faded.

Ace stepped out first, scanning angles the way she always did—vector-level, not emotional.

Mai followed, locking the door behind them.

As they walked to the car, Ace glanced up at the dark sky and said, quietly, “If it keeps doing the door sound...”

Mai didn’t look up. “We don’t answer.”

Ace’s tone turned faintly amused in spite of everything. “Even if it says it’s pizza?”

Mai shot her a look. “Especially if it says it’s pizza.”

Ace’s smile flashed—small, sharp, real. “Okay.”

They got in.

Ace started the engine.

Mai looked at the recorder display. The waveform was quiet now—flat line, soft hiss.

For the moment.

Ace pulled out into the wet street, headlights cutting a path through the ordinary.

And behind the ordinary—under it, between it—the seam continued to practice.

Not louder.

Not faster.

Just... better.

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