

Chapter 4: The Conversation That Doesn't Happen

They didn't go straight home.

Mai said it was procedure. Ace didn't argue, which was its own kind of answer.

They stopped at a small debrief room first—one of those “temporary” spaces that were always available because nobody wanted them. A table bolted to the floor, two chairs that didn't match, a wall panel for recordings that everyone pretended wasn't always on.

Mai checked the corner camera, didn't touch it, and still felt better for knowing where it was.

Witness.

Ace stayed standing for a while, back near the door, like the room might decide to close its teeth. The katanas were still cased. Her hands were empty. Her posture wasn't.

Mai sat, opened her tablet, stared at the incident form she'd already filed. She didn't add anything. Not yet.

Silence settled in, thick and not friendly.

Ace broke it first—because of course she did, because if a thing was going to bite, she'd rather bite it back.

“Your handwriting would've been kinder,” Ace said.

Mai didn't look up. “My handwriting would've been illegible.”

“Still kinder,” Ace insisted, and there was a faint edge of humor there—thin, almost performative, the way people joke when they don't want to say the other word.

Mai finally lifted her gaze. “You saw the word.”

Ace's eyes were bright in that wrong way. “Hard to miss.”

Mai nodded once, and her tone stayed deliberately boring. “You want me to pretend it wasn't accurate.”

Ace's jaw tightened. “I want you to not feed them a label.”

Mai leaned back slightly. The chair creaked like it was complaining. “I didn't feed them a label. I fed them a controlled narrative.”

Ace's mouth twitched—almost admiration, almost irritation. “That's the same thing with nicer shoes.”

Mai gave her a look. “Sit down.”

Ace didn't.

She shifted her weight. “No.”

Mai didn't repeat herself. She didn't command again. She waited. She let the room make Ace feel ridiculous for hovering.

Ace stayed hovering anyway, stubborn as a nail.

Mai exhaled through her nose and decided to try, carefully, not with force.

“Tell me what you felt,” Mai said.

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “I told you. It pulled.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Mai said. “Not the pressure. Your internal response.”

Ace’s gaze flicked away. The tiniest flinch, and Mai caught it like a thread.

“I didn’t like it,” Ace said.

Mai’s brow softened by a fraction. “You don’t like most things.”

Ace’s mouth moved like she might smile, but didn’t commit. “This was different.”

Mai waited. She didn’t fill the silence. She let it stay open, like a door Ace could walk through without being pushed.

Ace stared at the table as if the bolts in it were interesting.

“It was... passive,” Ace said finally. “And my body acted like it was about to do something.”

Mai nodded. “Mismatch.”

Ace’s voice sharpened. “So I corrected it.”

Mai’s tone didn’t change. “You attacked it.”

Ace snapped her gaze back to Mai. “Yes.”

Mai didn’t flinch. “And you damaged the environment instead.”

Ace’s needle wasn’t visible under her sleeve now, but Mai didn’t need it. Ace’s breathing had shifted—tight, shallow, controlled too hard.

“You’re doing it,” Mai said quietly.

Ace blinked. “Doing what.”

“The thing where you turn it into a technical debate,” Mai said. “So you don’t have to talk about the other part.”

Ace stared at her, and for a second the humor dropped cleanly out of her face.

“What other part.”

Mai chose her words with care. Not because she was afraid of Ace. Because she respected her enough to not be sloppy.

“The part where you weren’t choosing,” Mai said. “Not fully.”

Ace’s lips parted slightly.

Then she shut them.

Mai watched the refusal form in real time—like a door being locked from the inside.

Ace's voice came out calm, flat, almost tired. "I chose."

Mai didn't push harder. She just looked at her.

Ace held her gaze for a beat—then looked away first, shoulders tightening as if she'd been caught doing something shameful.

Mai's stomach tightened. Not anger. Not triumph.

Worry, clean and unpleasant.

"Ace," Mai said, and she kept it simple. "I'm not asking to blame you."

Ace's laugh was short and humorless. "Sure."

"I'm asking because if something is leaning on your decisions—" Mai paused, because she could feel the room listening now, could feel her own nerves wanting to do what they always did when the Foundation got close: shut down. "—then it's not going to stop at one incident."

Ace's eyes flicked back to her. "And what do you want me to say."

Mai's voice stayed steady. "I want you to say you felt it before you moved."

Ace's jaw worked.

For a moment, Mai thought she might actually do it. Give her that one clean fact. One honest anchor they could build on.

Instead Ace straightened.

She didn't get angry. She didn't explode. She did something worse: she made the conversation impossible.

"It's done," Ace said. "The fragment is contained. The report is filed. You got your word."

Mai watched her. The shift was subtle, but absolute—Ace wasn't "closing down" in a dramatic way. She was shelving it. Locking it in a compartment so deep even she wouldn't open it by accident.

Mai tried once more, softer. "I'm not your supervisor."

Ace's eyes snapped to her, sharp. "I know."

"I'm not here to manage you."

Ace's voice went colder. "Then stop writing like you are."

Mai's throat tightened. The sentence landed where it was aimed.

Not because it was fair.

Because it wasn't completely wrong.

Mai sat back. She stared at her own hands for a second, felt the urge to push, to force the issue, to pry open the door Ace had slammed.

She didn't.

Because forcing it would turn it into a different kind of rupture, and Mai was done making things worse with good intentions.

"Okay," Mai said quietly. "Then we leave."

Ace didn't move. "We were already going to leave."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Silence again.

The room's air tasted faintly like recycled dust.

Mai stood, closed her tablet, kept her movements slow and ordinary. "I'll update our availability schedule. If Oversight pings again—"

"They will," Ace said.

Mai didn't argue. "—we don't take it alone."

Ace's mouth twitched. "No private rooms."

Mai looked at her. "No private rooms."

Ace held her gaze for a second longer than necessary.

Then, at last, she stepped away from the door and fell into stride beside Mai as they walked out.

It wasn't reconciliation.

It was a truce.

Back in the hallway, the Foundation carried on being itself—people with badges and clipboards and quiet urgency, doors that hissed, cameras that watched without moving.

Mai kept their route in the bright lanes. Staffed intersections. Open sightlines.

Ace walked with her hands in her pockets again, like the earlier joke had never happened.

Mai felt the pressure on choice once—just a faint nudge at a junction—and she ignored it, choosing the opposite direction purely out of spite.

Ace's breath hitched, then steadied.

They reached the surface-level exit.

Outside, the air was cold enough to sting. The sky had that dull, heavy color that made everything look slightly unreal. Their vehicle waited where it always did: plain, unremarkable, Foundation-approved.

Mai unlocked it.

Ace got in without comment.

Mai sat behind the wheel and didn't start the engine immediately. She let the quiet sit between them for three heartbeats.

Ace didn't look at her. "Are we done."

Mai's fingers rested on the steering wheel. "For now."

Ace's voice was almost softer. Almost. "Good."

Mai started the car.

They drove.

And the conversation—the one that should have happened—stayed behind in that small bolted-room, like a file nobody wanted to open.

But it didn't disappear.

It simply waited. —

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