

## Chapter 5: Resonance Spike

The call came in like a shrug.

No sirens. No red channel. No “all hands.” Just a routine tasking packet pushed to Mai’s tablet with the same dull tone as a supply request.

That was the first bad sign.

Mai read it in their apartment with one hand on the kettle switch and the other on the screen, and the words sat there pretending to be normal:

Fragment signature detected. Non-aggressive behavior reported. Minimal civilian exposure. Responding unit: Ace / Mai. Note: keep site footprint small.

Mai stared at the phrase keep site footprint small until it started to feel like a joke someone had told badly.

Ace leaned against the doorway, arms loosely folded, hair still damp from a too-fast shower that hadn’t made her look rested—just cleaner. She didn’t ask what the task was. She watched Mai’s face instead.

“Small,” Ace said.

Mai didn’t glance up. “Yes.”

Ace’s mouth twitched. “So it’s not small.”

Mai locked the tablet, stood, and grabbed her coat. “It’s small on paper.”

Ace pushed off the doorframe. “Where.”

Mai hesitated just long enough to hate herself for it.

“Near the river,” she said. “Industrial edge. Old municipal infrastructure.”

Ace’s gaze sharpened. “I don’t like rivers.”

Mai’s voice stayed flat. “Nobody likes rivers.”

They moved without ceremony. No speech. No prep that looked like fear. Just the quiet muscle memory of people who’d learned that the fastest way to die was to act like you had time.

Foundation transport this time was a normal vehicle with a normal driver, not the sealed van. Less dramatic. More exposed.

Mai hated it.

They rolled through the city’s outer districts where the buildings got lower and the streetlights got farther apart. Winter had scraped everything down to essentials: wet asphalt, bare trees, breath that showed. The river ran alongside the road in a dark strip of moving metal.

Mai drove. She always drove when she could. She liked having the steering wheel in her hands. It made the world feel less like it was steering her.

Ace sat in the passenger seat with her knee drawn up and her fingers tapping lightly against her own sleeve, near where the needle sat under fabric. She wasn't restless. She was listening.

Mai kept her eyes on the road and still noticed every tiny change in Ace's breathing.

"You're not talking," Ace said.

Mai's tone was mild. "You filed a complaint last time."

Ace's mouth twitched. "I filed an observation."

Mai didn't smile, but the corner of her mouth moved anyway—barely. "Then observe this: I'm thinking."

Ace's eyes stayed on the river. "About what?"

Mai kept her voice deliberately boring. "About patterns."

Ace's fingers stopped tapping.

Mai felt the shift like a change in weather pressure.

They reached the location: an access road that dipped under a bridge, then followed the river toward a cluster of concrete buildings that looked like they'd been built when people still believed public infrastructure would last forever.

A municipal pumping station. Half active. Half abandoned. The kind of place where you could hear the past in the pipes.

Two Foundation vehicles were already there. One security. One technical. A small footprint.

Mai parked in the line of sight of both, not tucked away. Not hidden. Witness again, even out here.

A tech met them at the edge of the lot, hood up, tablet in hand, eyes bright with the wrong kind of excitement.

"Agents," she said quickly. "We've got a stable manifestation inside. It hasn't moved since initial report. It's not reacting to light, sound, or EM probes."

Mai nodded once. "Civilians."

"None inside the structure," the tech said. "There was one municipal worker who called it in. He's been relocated and interviewed. No injuries."

Mai didn't like the phrase relocated.

Ace's voice cut in, quiet. "Describe it."

The tech swallowed. "It's... like a thin black seam in the air. Vertical. Almost like a door frame without a door."

Mai's stomach tightened.

Ace's head tilted. "A seam."

“Yes.”

Mai didn't ask the next question out loud. She didn't want to give it shape in front of people who would write it down.

But Ace asked it anyway, because Ace always went straight for the bone.

“Does it feel like it wants to be opened.”

The tech's eyes flicked to Ace's face, then away. “We haven't tried to—”

Mai cut in. “Good. Don't.”

The tech nodded too fast. “Right. Yes. Of course.”

Mai turned her gaze toward the building entrance. “Where exactly.”

“Downstairs,” the tech said. “Lower intake level. We have sensors placed—”

Mai raised a hand slightly. “Show me. Don't narrate.”

They went in.

The pumping station smelled like wet concrete, old oil, and cold metal. The sound inside was constant: a low mechanical hum from the active systems, and beneath it the river itself—pressure, flow, a living weight moving through pipes.

Mai liked machines. Machines did what they were built to do. Machines didn't get ideas.

Ace walked beside her, quiet now in a more dangerous way. Her eyes weren't scanning corners.

They were fixed forward, as if she was following a thread only she could see.

The stairwell down was narrow and echoing. Mai made sure the security guy—Havel today, by coincidence or by design—came with them. She didn't order it. She just moved so that he had to follow if he wanted to do his job.

Havel had the look of someone who'd learned to regret curiosity.

“You two again,” he muttered under his breath.

Mai didn't look at him. “We're popular.”

Ace's mouth twitched. “We're educational.”

Havel snorted once, humorless.

They reached the lower level.

It was colder down here. The air tasted like iron and river stone. There were catwalks, railings, huge pipes that vanished into walls, and a long corridor lined with maintenance doors.

The seam was at the far end.

It was exactly what the tech had said: a thin vertical line in the air, about two meters tall, blacker than

shadow. Not a hole. Not a void. A line—sharp, confident, as if someone had drawn it with a ruler on reality.

And it did not move.

Mai stopped at the threshold of the corridor. “Nobody touches it.”

Havel’s gaze locked on it. “That’s... new.”

Ace didn’t answer. Her breathing had gone shallow.

Mai watched her needle—she’d pulled Ace’s sleeve up slightly in the vehicle without making it a moment. The analog strip sat in its band, then ticked up one notch.

One.

Mai felt her own muscles tighten. “Ace.”

Ace’s eyes didn’t leave the seam. “It’s not a fragment.”

Mai’s voice stayed calm. “Explain.”

Ace swallowed. “Fragments feel... hungry. This feels... precise.”

Mai didn’t like that word either.

“Precise” meant intent.

The seam shimmered—barely. Not like light on water. Like a thought shifting behind a face.

Ace’s needle rose another notch.

Mai took one slow step forward—only one—and felt it.

The pressure on choice.

Not on her feet. Not on her hands.

On her decision.

A faint, polite suggestion:

Go closer.

Mai stopped immediately.

“Okay,” Mai said softly, and kept her tone bored, because boredom was armor. “So it’s doing that to me too.”

Havel blinked. “Doing what.”

Ace’s eyes flicked to him for half a second. “Shut up.”

Havel’s mouth opened, then closed. He chose silence.

The seam didn't react to Havel. It didn't care about him.

It cared about the pair.

Mai's jaw tightened. "This is exactly the wrong location for this."

Ace's gaze sharpened. "Because of the water."

Mai nodded once. "Because of the pressure. Because of the flow. Because it gives it a rhythm."

Ace leaned forward slightly, as if her body wanted to get closer against her will. The needle ticked again.

Mai didn't touch her yet. She held that anchor back until she needed it. Touch too early could become routine. Routine could become a handle.

The seam shimmered again.

And then, from the far end of the corridor, the air shifted—subtle, almost elegant—and a second presence became visible.

Not the seam.

Something near it.

A faint violet haze, like a bruise in the air. It didn't have a body. It didn't have edges. It was a suggestion of color that wasn't light and wasn't smoke.

Mai felt the instant change in Ace.

The needle spiked.

Ace's pupils tightened.

Her shoulders went hard.

Mai didn't have to ask what it was.

The name was already in the room with them, uninvited.

Violet.

Ace's voice came out too quiet. "No."

The violet haze pulsed once—just once—and Mai felt the pressure on choice sharpen into something more personal.

It wasn't pushing her to walk.

It was pushing her to yield.

To hand control over to the easiest path.

To let Ace do what Ace always did when fear wore a mask:

Cut.

Ace's hands moved toward the cases on her back.

Mai's body moved before her mind finished deciding.

She stepped into Ace's path, turned slightly, and placed her palm—flat, firm—against Ace's sternum.

Not a shove. Not a restraint.

An anchor.

"Ace," Mai said, and her voice went low and immediate. "Eyes."

Ace's gaze snapped to her. For one heartbeat, there was a young woman there, not a weapon.

The needle dropped a fraction.

Then the violet haze pulsed again, and Ace's gaze tried to slide away like it was being pulled by a magnet.

Mai kept her hand where it was.

"Ace," Mai said again, harder. "Stay with me."

Ace's lips parted. "It—"

"I know," Mai cut in. "Stay."

Havel's hand hovered near his sidearm like he was thinking about becoming a hero. He didn't. Good.

Mai didn't look at him. She spoke anyway. "Havel. Back up. Call it in as active resonance. No engagement."

Havel swallowed. "Copy."

Mai could hear his radio click.

The seam shimmered.

The violet haze thickened slightly, and the corridor's light seemed to dull, like the world was holding its breath.

Ace's needle surged.

Ace's fingers hit the latch on her case.

Mai moved closer, bringing her face into Ace's line of sight—forcing eye contact like it was a physical barricade.

"No," Mai said, not loudly. Not dramatically. Absolute. "Not like this."

Ace's voice shook once, just once. "It's in my head."

Mai didn't deny it. Denial would be insult. She made it concrete instead.

"Then we treat it like a head injury," Mai said. "We stabilize. We do not swing."

Ace's jaw clenched. She wanted to argue. Mai could see it.

But the violet haze pulsed again and Ace's argument died in her throat, replaced by raw, body-level urgency.

Ace tried to step around Mai.

Mai caught her wrist—lightly, two fingers, not gripping, just contacting.

The needle steadied for half a second.

Mai leaned in, voice a knife wrapped in velvet. "You are not alone in there."

Ace's eyes flicked, and something in them cracked—not breaking, not collapsing. Just a hairline shift that let in air.

The violet haze trembled, as if irritated.

Mai felt the pressure on her own choices surge:

Let her go. Let her cut. Let it be clean.

Mai hated how tempting "clean" felt for a split second.

She recognized it. She named it silently.

And then she did the opposite out of spite.

Mai released Ace's wrist.

Ace's eyes widened—confusion for half a beat, because Mai never let go at the wrong moment.

Mai stepped past Ace instead.

Straight toward the seam.

Havel hissed, "Mai—"

Mai didn't answer him.

Ace's voice snapped, sharp with panic. "Mai, no!"

Mai felt the pressure on choice become almost delighted.

Yes. Closer.

Mai walked anyway, slow and boring, every step deliberate. Not rushing. Not yielding. Not performing.

She stopped three meters from the seam.

The violet haze pulsed and shifted toward her, like it wanted to brush her mind instead.

Mai lifted her chin.

“Not you,” Mai said softly—speaking to the haze like it was a person, because sometimes the only way to insult a thing was to refuse to fear it. “You don’t get to play with her by borrowing my hands.”

Ace’s needle behind her wavered—then steadied, like Ace’s brain had found something to hold onto: Mai being stupid on purpose.

Mai reached into her coat pocket and pulled out something simple.

A strip of matte-black tape.

Not a containment device. Not a relic. Not a ritual.

Office tape.

Havel made a sound like disbelief. “You’re kidding.”

Mai didn’t look back. “I’m improvising.”

She tore a strip.

The seam shimmered as if amused.

Mai stepped closer—one step—and felt the pressure in her skull spike, a bright, sharp suggestion:

Touch it. Open it.

Mai’s stomach rolled.

She didn’t touch it.

Instead, she slapped the tape onto the concrete floor, right at the corridor threshold—across a hairline crack in the slab.

A stupid gesture.

A human gesture.

A line.

Mai stepped back behind her tape line.

The pressure stuttered. Just for a fraction.

The violet haze trembled like something had lost traction.

Mai looked over her shoulder at Ace.

Ace was frozen, hands still on her case, eyes locked on Mai like she couldn’t decide whether to kill her or worship her.

Mai’s mouth twitched. “You still with me.”

Ace swallowed. “Yes.”

The needle steadied.

Mai turned her head toward the violet haze again and spoke in that same boring, precise tone she used for paperwork.

“You want clean,” Mai said quietly. “You want predictable.”

The violet shimmer tightened.

Mai pointed down at her tape line.

“You don’t get it.”

The haze pulsed, harder this time—and for the first time, Mai felt something like anger in it. Not human anger. Pattern anger. A system being denied its preferred outcome.

Ace’s needle spiked again.

Mai didn’t wait for it to build.

“Back,” Mai said, sharp now, to both of them. “We leave. Now.”

Ace moved first.

Not toward the seam.

Toward Mai.

She crossed the corridor in two strides and stopped just behind her, close enough that Mai could feel her warmth through layers of clothing.

Havel backed up, eyes wide, radio tight in his hand.

The seam shimmered one last time—like a door pretending it didn’t want to be opened.

Then the violet haze snapped inward.

Not vanishing—compressing, like it had been forced to swallow itself.

The pressure on choice eased suddenly, so abruptly Mai nearly stumbled from the absence of it.

Mai’s breath caught.

Ace’s needle dropped two notches.

Silence flooded the corridor.

Not peace.

Just absence.

Mai didn’t move for a second. She didn’t trust the quiet. She’d learned better.

Then she turned, slowly, to Ace.

Ace’s face was pale. Not in the dramatic way. In the physiological way that meant her body had run a mile while standing still.

Mai kept her voice level. "You okay."

Ace blinked hard. "No."

Mai nodded once, accepting the honesty like a gift. "Good. That means you're still here."

Ace stared at her tape line on the floor.

"That was... stupid," Ace whispered.

Mai's mouth twitched. "Yes."

Ace's eyes flicked to her. "Why did it work."

Mai swallowed. She didn't know. Not fully.

So she gave the only true answer she had.

"It didn't like being defined by a cheap human rule," Mai said. "It wanted a clean opening. It didn't want... petty."

Ace's breath hitched—almost laughter, almost tears. "You fought it with pettiness."

Mai's expression stayed calm. "I fought it with reality."

Havel found his voice again. "Oversight is going to—"

Mai cut him off without looking. "Oversight can write it down."

Havel shut up.

Mai bent, peeled the tape off the floor, and stuck it back onto itself. A ridiculous souvenir.

Ace watched her hands like she was watching someone disarm a bomb with a paperclip.

Mai tucked the tape back into her pocket.

Then she looked at Ace—really looked.

"Ace," Mai said, and her voice went low enough to be private even in a corridor. "You were about to cut me out of your line of sight."

Ace's eyes tightened. "I didn't want you in danger."

Mai's reply was immediate, cold in its clarity. "I was already in danger. I'm always in danger when you stop seeing me."

Ace flinched—small, real.

Mai didn't soften it. Not because she was cruel.

Because this was where the line had to be.

Ace swallowed. "Okay."

Mai nodded once. "Good."

They didn't stay to negotiate with the corridor. They didn't stay to "finish the job." They walked away while the quiet held, because that was the only professional choice.

As they climbed the stairs back to the upper level, Mai felt her own hands start shaking—tiny tremors she could hide by keeping them in her pockets.

Ace noticed anyway.

"You're shaking," Ace said.

Mai didn't look at her. "I'm fine."

Ace's tone sharpened, suddenly protective in the simplest way. "Liar."

Mai exhaled—one slow breath, controlled. "Yes."

Ace fell silent again, but this time it was different.

She wasn't closing.

She was staying near.

When they reached daylight, the river wind hit them like a slap. The vehicles waited. The tech team was talking into radios with the tight, excited voices of people who wanted to turn a moment into a program.

Mai didn't let that happen here.

She walked straight to the vehicle, opened the passenger door, and looked at Ace.

"Sit," Mai said.

Ace blinked. "That sounded like an order."

"It was," Mai said. "Sit."

Ace sat.

Mai closed the door gently, like closing a file that still had teeth, then walked around to the driver's side.

Havel lingered, uncertain. "What do I report?"

Mai looked at him, face neutral.

"The truth," Mai said. "We had a resonance spike. I interrupted. We withdrew. No breach."

Havel hesitated. "And the violet signature?"

Mai's eyes hardened. "You didn't see violet."

Havel's mouth opened.

Mai didn't raise her voice. She didn't need to.

"You didn't see violet," Mai repeated.

Havel swallowed. "Copy."

He walked away.

Mai got into the driver's seat and started the engine.

Ace stared out the window at the river. The water moved like it didn't care about anything they'd just done.

After a minute, Ace spoke, very quietly.

"It tried to make it clean again."

Mai kept her eyes on the road. "Yes."

Ace's fingers touched Mai's hand on the steering wheel—light contact, not asking, not pleading. Just anchoring.

Mai didn't pull away.

Ace's voice was smaller than usual. "Thank you."

Mai's throat tightened. She kept her tone boring anyway.

"Don't thank me," Mai said. "Stay with me."

Ace nodded once.

The needle on her forearm stayed steady all the way back.

But Mai didn't mistake steady for safe.

Steady was just the calm surface of a pressure system.

And something out there had just learned a new fact:

They could resist.

Which meant next time, it would try harder. —

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