

## Chapter 6: This Isn't External Anymore

They didn't speak on the drive back.

Not because there was nothing to say—because there was too much, and saying the wrong part first would poison the rest.

The city slid past in gray layers: concrete, glass, wet asphalt, the river gone now but still felt in the bones like an afterimage. Mai drove with both hands on the wheel, steady enough to look calm. Ace sat in the passenger seat and stared at her own reflection in the side window, as if checking that her face still belonged to her.

The tape was in Mai's coat pocket. Stupid, cheap tape. She could feel it when she moved, like a quiet joke that refused to die.

At a red light, Ace's fingers brushed Mai's knuckles again—light contact, not needy, not performative. A check-in.

Mai didn't look at her. She let the contact exist.

When they reached the apartment complex, the parking garage felt colder than usual. The hum of the lights overhead was too even, too clinical. Foundation-owned buildings always had that same sterile heartbeat, like the place itself was waiting for instructions.

Mai parked, killed the engine, and sat still for three seconds longer than necessary.

Ace didn't move. She didn't reach for the door.

Mai understood that, too.

Upstairs, the apartment was exactly as they'd left it: cups on the drying rack, the chair slightly crooked, a faint smell of detergent and quiet. Normal things. Anchors.

Mai locked the door behind them, then did the small ritual that never showed up in any report: she checked the corners with her eyes, not because she expected an intruder, but because she needed her body to believe the room was real.

Ace set the katana cases back against the wall in the same place as before. The exact same angle. She did it with too much care—like if the cases sat wrong, something else would slide out of alignment.

Mai hung her coat. The tape bumped her ribs through the fabric.

She went to the kitchen, filled the kettle, turned it on.

Ace leaned against the counter, close but not crowding, watching Mai's hands like they were a program she needed to memorize.

Mai didn't offer tea. Not yet. Tea was comfort, and comfort could wait until the truth had a place to sit.

The kettle began its low climb toward boiling.

Mai opened her tablet and, without sitting down, pulled up the internal comms log. She wasn't searching for a message.

She was checking whether there wasn't one.

Nothing new.

That was another bad sign.

Ace broke the silence first, voice quieter than it had been all day.

"It felt pleased," Ace said.

Mai didn't answer immediately. She didn't ask "what," because she knew.

"The pressure," Mai said.

Ace nodded once. "Not when it pushed. When you refused."

Mai's eyes narrowed slightly. "Like it learned."

Ace's mouth tightened. "Like it adjusted."

Mai set the tablet down. Her fingertips stayed on the edge of it, a small restraint—one more anchor.

"Ace," Mai said, controlled, "talk me through the moment before you moved."

Ace stared at the kettle like it had personally offended her.

"No," Ace said.

Mai didn't react. She didn't argue. She waited.

Ace's jaw worked once. Then, begrudgingly—like giving up a blade—she spoke.

"I saw you step toward it," Ace said. "And my first thought was to remove the problem."

Mai's stomach went cold, but her face didn't change.

"Remove," Mai repeated.

Ace's eyes flicked to her, sharp and a little ashamed. "Not you. The situation."

Mai kept her voice boring. "You were going to cut."

Ace's throat moved. "Yes."

Mai nodded once. No drama. No accusation. Just the fact, placed on the table like a tool.

"And then," Mai said.

Ace's gaze dropped. "Then you said... you were already in danger when I stopped seeing you."

Mai didn't soften. She let the words stand.

Ace's voice went smaller. "That hit."

Mai watched her carefully. Ace wasn't collapsing. She wasn't spiraling. She was doing something rarer

and harder.

She was letting a truth land.

Mai exhaled slowly. "This isn't external anymore."

Ace's head lifted slightly. "I know."

The kettle clicked as it reached boil. The sound sliced the room in half—domestic and absurd against the weight between them.

Mai poured water into two cups anyway, because her hands needed something human to do. She slid one cup toward Ace.

Ace didn't touch it.

Mai didn't comment.

She sat at the table, tablet closed now. She wasn't going to write a report tonight. Reports were for people who didn't live inside the thing they were describing.

"Ace," Mai said, low and even, "I'm going to say something and you're not going to argue with it."

Ace's mouth twitched faintly, a ghost of her usual defiance. "That sounds like an argument invitation."

Mai's eyes stayed on hers. "No. It's a boundary."

Ace's humor died cleanly. "Okay."

Mai nodded once. "If you feel the pull—if you feel that push on your choices—you tell me before you act. Even if it's one second. Even if it feels stupid. Even if you hate the words."

Ace stared at her for a long moment.

Mai didn't blink.

Ace finally spoke, voice rougher than normal. "And if I can't."

Mai's answer came instantly. "Then I act for you."

Ace flinched—tiny, real.

Mai didn't back off. "You don't get to be alone with it. Not anymore."

Ace's hands curled slightly on the table edge. She didn't reach for the tea.

"You're making me an injury," Ace said quietly.

Mai's tone didn't soften, but it wasn't cruel. "I'm making you a person."

Ace's eyes held hers. Bright, raw, honest in a way that made Mai's chest tighten.

For a second, Ace looked like she might say thank you again.

Instead she said, "What if it makes you do it too."

Mai swallowed once. That was the right fear.

"It already tried," Mai said. "And if it ever succeeds—"

Ace's voice cut in, sharp. "Don't."

Mai didn't stop. "—you stop me. You don't hesitate. You don't negotiate. You do whatever you have to."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "That's not fair."

Mai's mouth twitched. "Welcome to partnership."

Ace stared at her, then—very slowly—she reached for the cup. Her fingers wrapped around it like she was learning what warmth was again.

She took a small sip.

Mai felt something in her own body unclench by a fraction.

Ace set the cup down carefully. "So what now."

Mai leaned back slightly, eyes half-lidded, thinking.

"Now," Mai said, "we make the Foundation boring."

Ace blinked. "Explain."

"We give them no spectacle," Mai said. "No solo incidents. No private rooms. No dramatic heroics. We do everything in spaces with witnesses. We move like paperwork."

Ace's mouth twitched. "I hate paperwork."

"I know," Mai said. "That's why it works."

Ace's gaze sharpened again, a flicker of her usual edge returning—not as armor, but as life.

"And the seam," Ace said.

Mai's fingers tapped once on the table. "We log it as active resonance risk. We recommend site quarantine. We do not name Violet."

Ace's eyes tightened. "You think they already know."

Mai didn't answer with certainty she didn't have. She kept it raw.

"I think someone suspects," Mai said. "And I think they want to isolate the variable."

Ace's voice went flat. "Me."

Mai's eyes stayed on hers. "Us."

Ace held that for a beat, then nodded once.

The silence that followed was different from the earlier silence. It still had weight, but it wasn't empty.

It was shared.

Mai reached into her coat pocket and pulled out the tape. She set it on the table between them like a ridiculous artifact.

Ace stared at it.

Mai's voice stayed dry. "This is now officially a containment tool."

Ace's lips twitched. Then—finally—she let out a small, real laugh. Short. Rough. Human.

Mai didn't smile wide, but her eyes softened.

Ace looked at the tape, then at Mai. "You're insane."

Mai shrugged. "Yes."

Ace's fingers touched the tape lightly, as if expecting it to bite.

"It didn't like petty," Ace murmured.

Mai's gaze sharpened. "No."

Ace looked up. "So we become petty."

Mai's answer was immediate. "We become precise."

Ace's eyes flashed. "That too."

Mai stood, took her cup, and walked to the sink. She rinsed it slowly, deliberately, letting her nervous system follow the ritual.

Behind her, Ace stayed seated, cup in hand, breathing steady.

Mai didn't mistake it for safety.

But it was something.

And for tonight, something was enough.

Because the pressure had learned they could resist.

Which meant the next move wouldn't be polite.

It would be smart. —

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