

## Chapter 7½: Internal Review

The Foundation didn't gather for emergencies.

It gathered when something had gone too smoothly.

The conference room was not secret. It was simply far. Too far to stumble into, too ordinary to remember. The table was long, the lighting even, the ventilation loud enough to sand down silence.

Three screens came alive at once.

No names. No faces. Only titles and timestamps.

— Operational Review: Ace / Mai — Classification: Non-hostile anomaly exposure — Risk Vector: Operator resonance

“Нет утечки,” one voice said automatically—then corrected itself in the same breath, like an internal language leak caught and patched. “No leak.”

“Нет последователя,” another added. “No follower.”

“No repeatable phenomenon,” a third concluded.

Reports were skimmed fast. Too fast.

Everything that could be measured was measured. Everything that didn't fit was tagged contextual and moved aside like an embarrassment. Graphs. Lines. Neat curves. A tidy spike in Ace's physiological banding, a neat stabilization, a little note about “environmental damage.”

“Overpressure without rupture,” someone said.

“Subject remains functional.”

“Pair dynamic stable. No dependency behavior.”

A pause.

Not the kind where people think. The kind where an institution chooses.

“We pull the Foundation back,” a voice said.

Not dramatic. Not angry. Administrative.

“One mandate. One responsible chain. No field-level continuation.”

“No punishment,” another said, because the Foundation liked to pretend it was benevolent when it was simply efficient.

“No promotion,” someone else added, because rewards created expectations.

No discussion of Ace and Mai as people.

Only as variables.

A line of text appeared on the screen, entered somewhere in the system by someone who would

never meet them:

Asset-status adjusted. Oversight disengaged.

It wasn't freedom.

It was detachment.

And deep in the machine—so deep nobody in that room noticed—one assumption quietly stopped being true:

Ace no longer fit a category the Foundation knew how to use.

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