



Prelude — Clean Break

Tokyo didn't sleep. It just changed its mask.

At street level it was neon and polite lies, trains threading through towers like needles through cloth. Down below—under the service roads and the maintenance hatches and the ductwork that nobody photographed—it was a living machine. Warm pipes. Condensation. Electric hum. The smell of wet concrete and old metal.

Mai liked it down there more than she liked the skyline.

The elevator cage rattled as it descended, a utilitarian box bolted into a service shaft behind a municipal water facility in Ōta. The kind of place that didn't make maps. The kind of door that didn't get a sign.

A Foundation tech stood with his back to the wall, hands clasped over a pelican case like it was a life vest. His uniform was clean in the way uniforms were always clean in reports and never clean in the field.

Mai watched the floor indicator tick down: B2... B3... B4...

She wasn't nervous. Not in the normal sense.

Nervous implied you knew what you were afraid of.

This was different. This was the itch you got when a system lied to you with a straight face.

"You're sure it's stable?" she asked.

The tech swallowed. "Stable in the sense that it's not growing."

Mai looked at him. "That's not stable."

He flinched at the flatness in her tone. People always expected panic or bravado. They didn't know what to do with someone who treated the wrongness like a math problem.

"It's been... the same for fourteen hours," he said, trying again. "Boundary readings haven't shifted. Temperature hasn't shifted. Pressure hasn't shifted."

"Sound?" Mai asked.

He hesitated. That told her more than his answer.

"We can't get audio through," he admitted. "Not even contact mics on the pipe. It's like... it swallows the signal."

Mai nodded once. Filed it away. A dead zone that ate sound. Not a monster. Not a demon. Just an absence with teeth.

"Who's running this?" she asked.

"Site liaison is on comms. Handler name Bright." The tech said the name like it was a key he wasn't sure he was allowed to touch.

Mai didn't react. Names didn't matter yet. Functions mattered.

B5.

The elevator slowed. The cage lights flickered once, then steadied. Mai watched the tech's fingers tighten on his case.

She thought of Tokyo above them—millions of people living in perfect ignorance of the fact that, under their feet, reality occasionally misfiled itself.

The doors clanged open.

A concrete corridor stretched into harsh white light. Portable floods. Extension cords taped to the floor. Two armed guards at a temporary checkpoint. Past them: an access stairwell down into the deeper maintenance network.

And in the middle of it all, someone leaning against a pillar like she'd been there long enough to become part of the architecture.

Small. Compact. Hood up. Black hair with a violet sheen where the light caught it, like oil on water. Two long cases at her feet that didn't look like firearms but didn't look like anything else, either.

Ace didn't stand when the elevator opened. She just tilted her head slightly, eyes tracking Mai with the calm attention of an animal that had already decided you weren't food.

Mai stepped out. Her boots clicked once on concrete. The sound felt too loud in the tight space.

"Ace," the tech said, relief creeping into his voice like a leak. "You're—uh—here."

Ace's gaze slid to him for half a second, then back to Mai. No smile. No greeting. Not rude, just... economical.

Mai walked up to the checkpoint and flashed her clearance. A guard scanned it and waved her through. The other guard didn't take his eyes off Ace.

Mai stopped beside Ace and looked down at the cases. "You brought both."

Ace's eyes flicked to the cases. "Yes."

Her voice was quiet. Not soft. Quiet like a room with thick walls.

Mai nodded. "That means you think it's physical."

"I think it's wrong," Ace said.

Mai allowed herself the smallest exhale. That was closer to her own internal language than most people ever got.

"Brief," Mai said, and pointed down the stairwell.

Ace pushed off the pillar without haste, lifted both cases like they weighed nothing, and followed.

As they descended, the air changed. Not temperature. Not humidity. Something else. A pressure in the back of the teeth. Like a low-frequency vibration you couldn't hear but your bones understood.

Mai pulled a compact field tablet from her bag, the screen already alive with baseline readings. She'd been running passive scans since the elevator. She didn't trust first impressions. She trusted deltas.

"Location is a decommissioned telecom splice room," she said, more for herself than for Ace.

"Originally part of the metro's old emergency line routing. Shut down years ago. Maintenance crew went in to check flooding. They didn't come out."

Ace didn't ask questions. She walked with her head slightly angled, as if listening to the walls.

"Search team went in," Mai continued. "Came back with missing time. Fifteen minutes in their bodies, two hours on their watches. No memory of the interior past the threshold."

"Threshold," Ace repeated, like she was tasting the word.

Mai glanced at her. "Yes. It has a clean boundary."

Ace's eyes didn't change, but Mai felt the shift in attention. *Clean boundaries are traps.*

They reached the bottom of the stairwell. A corridor opened into a wider maintenance artery: pipes overhead, painted lines on the floor, old signage in Japanese warning about high voltage and restricted access.

The Foundation had moved fast. Floodlights. Portable barriers. A whiteboard with a time log and scribbled notes. A plastic tarp taped over a doorway, as if the right kind of plastic could stop the wrong kind of reality.

Two field agents stood by the tarp, faces pale under harsh light. One of them nodded at Mai like she was a doctor arriving to a patient who'd been bleeding for hours.

Mai stepped in and spoke with the flat authority that made people obey because they didn't know what else to do.

"Who crossed last?" she asked.

Agent with a shaved head. "Team Delta. Twenty minutes ago. They came back... wrong."

Mai's fingers paused on her tablet. "Define wrong."

He swallowed. "They were... quiet. Didn't answer questions. They stared at the wall like they were listening to a language we couldn't hear. Then they started coughing blood. Small amounts. Like nosebleeds but deeper."

Mai's jaw tightened. That wasn't fear. That was irritation, sharp and controlled. Coughing blood meant stress on tissues. Stress meant force. Force meant mechanism.

"And the missing crew?" Mai asked.

The agent looked at the tarp. "No signal beyond it."

Mai didn't like "no signal." "No signal" was what you said when you didn't have a vocabulary yet.

Ace had stopped three steps from the tarp. Her posture changed—subtle, but Mai saw it because she'd learned to notice small shifts in systems. Ace's shoulders settled. Weight distributed. Like she was becoming denser.

"You feel it?" Mai asked.

Ace nodded once. "It doesn't like sound."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "You can tell."

Ace didn't answer directly. "It tightens when you speak."

Mai stared at the tarp, then at the concrete around it. She ran her fingertips along the taped seam. The tape was ordinary. The wall behind it was not.

She stepped back and unshouldered her bag. Pulled out a small pouch of chalk and a thin metal rod etched with tiny runes—nothing dramatic, nothing glowing. Tools.

One of the agents opened his mouth, probably to ask what she was doing. Mai lifted a hand without looking at him. He closed it again.

Mai began marking the floor. Not a circle. Not a ritual diagram. A set of anchor points—short lines, intersecting angles. A language that wasn't magic so much as *structure.*

Ace watched her hands.

"How many?" Ace asked.

Mai didn't look up. "Unknown. But the boundary is clean. That suggests a loop. Loops have feed points."

Ace crouched by the tarp, close enough that the air rippled faintly around her hood. "Feed points," she echoed.

Mai finished the third mark, then set her tablet down on the floor and tapped through sensor overlays. She watched the readout. She watched the micro-oscillations. A slight drift in magnetic field strength near one corner of the doorway. Not enough for anyone else to notice. Enough for her.

"There," Mai said, pointing. "North-east corner. It's not aligned."

Ace followed her finger. Her head tilted.

Mai rose, slid the runed rod from her hand back into her bag, and pulled out her disruptor pistol. Compact. Matte black. Runes carved into the frame like scars. She checked the charge. Half full. Fine.

"I can dampen the edge," Mai said. "Not break it. If I try to disrupt the whole boundary, we'll lose control."

Ace stood. "You want me to break it."

Mai looked at Ace, really looked. Under the hood, the violet eyes caught the floodlights and reflected them back wrong—like the color wasn't just pigment but depth.

"I want you to cut one point," Mai said. "Not the whole thing. If you cut it here—" She tapped the corner with her knuckle. "—the loop should collapse inward instead of lashing out."

Ace didn't move. "Should."

Mai didn't flinch. "Yes."

Ace's gaze dropped to Mai's disruptor. "You can hold it."

Mai nodded. "For seconds. That's all I need."

The shaved-head agent shifted, uneasy. "Are you two... working together?"

Mai answered without looking at him. "We are now."

Ace didn't contradict her.

Mai keyed her comms. "Bright. We're going in."

Static. Then a voice, distant and clipped, like a man reading a report over a bad line.

"Copy," Bright said. "Keep it minimal. Don't chase anomalies. Don't improvise heroics."

Mai's mouth twitched. Not a smile. Something sharper. "That's... not my style."

"You'll have to define your style later," Bright said. "You have eight minutes before I call withdrawal."

Mai glanced at Ace. Ace didn't react. Eight minutes, eight seconds—it didn't matter. She moved when it was time to move.

Mai turned to the agents. "Nobody crosses the tarp. If you hear anything—voices, knocks, anything—you do not respond. You do not speak back."

One agent frowned. "What if it's them?"

Mai met his eyes. "Then they'll be dead if you answer."

Silence. Then a nod.

Mai took a breath. Not deep. Just enough to set her own rhythm.

Ace moved to the tarp and set her cases down gently, like laying a weapon on an altar. She opened one case. Two katanas lay inside, their edges faintly lit with emerald fracture-lines. The green glow didn't brighten the corridor. It made the shadows look more honest.

Ace drew both blades. The sound was wrong—too quiet, as if the air was absorbing it.

Mai stepped beside her, disruptor raised but not aimed at Ace. Aiming was a kind of aggression, and she didn't want to put any extra intent into the system.

"Ready?" Mai asked.

Ace nodded.

Mai reached out and pulled the tarp aside.

The doorway beyond was darkness that wasn't just lack of light. It was a kind of matte absence. The floodlights behind them didn't penetrate. The edges of the doorframe looked slightly warped, like the concrete had softened.

Mai took one step forward.

The pressure in her teeth intensified. Her ears popped softly, like she'd gone up a mountain too fast. Her tablet—still back on the floor outside—spiked once and flatlined.

Ace stepped in behind her.

The moment they crossed, the air changed. Sound didn't echo. Mai could hear her own breathing, but it sounded like it was happening in another room. Her boots hit the floor without the expected slap of rubber on concrete.

The space inside was... small. Smaller than the outside architecture suggested. A telecom splice room: racks of old wiring, metal cabinets, junction boxes. Dust. Pooled water in one corner.

But the room was wrong in a subtler way.

The lines didn't meet correctly. The corners were just slightly too acute. The ceiling felt a centimeter

too low, the walls a centimeter too close. Like a photograph that had been compressed without anyone admitting it.

Mai's disruptor hum deepened, runes on the frame warming against her palm.

Ace's blades brightened slightly.

Mai lifted her hand and pointed at the northeast corner of the doorframe. Inside, that corner wasn't quite the same as outside. The concrete there looked... layered. Like poured cement over poured cement. A seam.

Mai took two small steps toward it, every sense watching for feedback.

The room tightened.

Not physically. In her head. Like the space was focusing on her presence and deciding what she was.

Mai hated that. Not because it scared her, but because it was *disrespectful.* Systems weren't supposed to judge.

Her tongue felt thick. Speaking would be a mistake.

She didn't speak.

She raised the disruptor, aimed at the seam, and fired a low-power pulse.

The air around the corner shivered. Not visibly. Mai felt it in her fingernails, in the back of her eyes. The seam softened. The pressure eased by a fraction.

Ace moved.

No flourish. No shout. She took one step, brought her left blade up, and pressed the edge into the softened seam as if she were testing a piece of fruit.

Then she pushed.

Not hard. Not dramatic. A controlled application of force, like she was closing a circuit.

The blade met resistance—logic resistance, not just concrete—and Ace leaned into it with quiet stubbornness.

Mai's disruptor whined as the runes heated. She felt the boundary around them tighten again, reacting to intrusion.

A thin sound began in the walls. Not a howl. Not a growl. A vibration, like metal being flexed too many times.

Mai didn't look away from the seam. She watched the microfractures bloom around Ace's blade—tiny emerald-lit cracks spidering through concrete like glass.

Ace's jaw clenched. A bead of blood appeared at the edge of her nostril. She didn't wipe it.

Mai adjusted the disruptor's frequency by feel, not by sight. She couldn't trust her eyes in here. She trusted the weapon's vibration against her palm, the subtle change in pitch.

Ace pushed a fraction more.

Something *gave.*

Not like a wall breaking. Like a loop snapping.

The seam split.

For half a second the room went perfectly still. No vibration. No pressure. Even Mai's breath felt suspended.

Then the space folded inward.

The cabinets blurred. The wiring racks seemed to pull toward the broken corner like iron filings toward a magnet. The darkness in the doorway thickened, as if trying to seal itself.

Mai felt her stomach drop. Spatial collapse. Controlled, but still collapse.

Ace didn't retreat. She stepped into the fold, blades held low, and made one more cut—short, precise—across the fracture line.

A final severing.

The room *blinked.*

Mai's ears popped hard. Sound slammed back into existence—harsh and loud and normal. She staggered, catching herself on a metal rack that suddenly felt very real.

Ace was already moving backward, out of the doorway, pulling Mai with her by the sleeve as if Mai were a piece of equipment that needed to be extracted before it got lost.

They crossed the threshold.

The pressure in Mai's teeth vanished like a switch flipped. The floodlights roared in her ears. The corridor's echo returned. The world felt too big for a second.

Mai's knees threatened to buckle. Not from weakness, but from recalibration. Like her body had to remember the size of reality.

Ace let go of her sleeve. She turned and looked back at the doorway.

The tarp fluttered gently in the air currents of the corridor.

Behind it, the darkness was gone.

Just a normal splice room now. Dust, cabinets, dead wiring. A maintenance space that was finally what it claimed to be.

The agents stared.

One of them stepped forward, hand half-raised as if he wanted to touch the air. "It's... gone."

Mai breathed out slowly. "Yes."

Ace wiped the blood from beneath her nose with the back of her wrist. It smeared across her skin like

a careless signature.

The shaved-head agent looked from Mai to Ace. "What the hell was that?"

Mai's eyes flicked to Ace, then back to the agent. "A loop."

He blinked. "A loop of what?"

Mai's expression didn't change. "Wrong."

That was as much explanation as he was going to get.

She keyed her comms. "Bright. Boundary collapsed. Interior normalized."

There was a pause, as if Bright was reading the report in his head already.

"Copy," he said. "Any casualties?"

Mai glanced at Ace. Ace shook her head once.

"No," Mai said. "Not this time."

Bright exhaled softly over the line. "Good. Bag it and seal it. And... Mai."

"Yes?"

"You did what you came to do," Bright said, tone neutral but edged with something she couldn't name. "Stay available. I have another assignment coming in."

Mai's thumb hovered over the comms control. "Understood."

She cut the line.

The corridor filled with the low-level noise of people moving again. Agents talking into radios. A tech unspooling hazard tape. Someone laughing, too loud, too relieved.

Mai stepped aside, away from the activity, and leaned against the cold concrete wall. Her hands were steady, but her brain was already replaying the collapse, trying to model what she'd felt.

The problem was: there was nothing to hold onto.

No residue.

No signature.

The loop had been cut so cleanly it left no scar.

Mai hated clean cuts like that. They implied someone could erase things.

Ace walked over and stood beside her, just out of arm's reach. The cases were back at Ace's feet, blades sheathed. The emerald glow had dimmed to a faint hum you could almost pretend was normal.

Mai watched Ace out of the corner of her eye. Not as a person. As the function.

"You didn't hesitate," Mai said.

Ace looked at her. "You didn't either."

Mai's mouth tightened. "I hesitated internally."

Ace's gaze flicked away, then back. "That's fine."

It was a strange thing to hear. Not comfort. Not reassurance. Permission.

Mai reached into her bag and pulled out two canned coffees from a side pocket. She'd grabbed them from a vending machine above ground out of habit. Tokyo ran on caffeine and denial.

She offered one to Ace.

Ace looked at the can like it might be a trap. Then she took it.

Mai popped her own can open. The hiss sounded aggressively normal.

Ace didn't open hers right away. She held it, feeling the cold through the metal.

Mai sipped. Bitter. Sweet. Familiar.

"So," Mai said, careful not to inject drama into it. "You can break things that don't want to be broken."

Ace's eyes lowered. "I can break things."

Mai considered that. "That's not the same."

Ace didn't respond.

Mai took another sip and let the silence sit. Silence was useful when it wasn't being eaten.

After a moment, Ace spoke, almost reluctantly. "You told me where."

Mai nodded. "Because if you cut the wrong point, it would have... lashed out."

Ace's fingers tightened slightly around the can. "It wanted to."

"Yes," Mai said. "And you didn't let it."

Ace's eyes narrowed, as if that statement bothered her. "You held it."

Mai shrugged. "For seconds."

Ace's expression didn't soften, but something in her posture eased—some internal latch unclipped.

Mai noticed it because she noticed everything.

They stood like that for a while, shoulder to shoulder without touching. Two people sharing the same air after a room had tried to steal it.

The shaved-head agent approached, stopping a respectful distance away, like he'd learned the hard way that stepping into someone's orbit without permission was a bad idea.

"Foundation wants statements," he said. "Standard procedure."

Mai's eyes stayed on her coffee. "You have the sensor logs."

"We need—"

Mai lifted her gaze. It wasn't threatening. It was simply final. "You have the logs."

The agent's mouth closed. He glanced at Ace. Ace stared back with the blank calm of someone who would not be moved by paperwork.

The agent cleared his throat. "Fine. We'll... handle it."

He left.

Mai watched him go. Then she looked at Ace again.

"You don't like them," Mai said.

Ace's answer was immediate. "They like forms."

Mai's lips twitched. It was almost a smile. Almost.

Ace noticed. Her eyes flicked to Mai's mouth, then away again quickly, like she'd caught herself looking at something she wasn't supposed to.

Mai let it pass. Too early for that kind of awareness to mean anything. Better that it stayed accidental.

She finished her coffee and crushed the can with one hand. The metal crumpled loudly. The sound echoed. Normal.

Ace finally opened hers. The hiss was softer. She took one sip, made a faint face, then took another anyway.

Mai glanced up at the corridor's ceiling, where pipes ran like veins. Somewhere above them, Tokyo continued pretending it was safe.

"Bright said another assignment," Mai said, as if discussing weather.

Ace's eyes shifted. "Soon."

Mai nodded. "Probably."

Ace looked at her. "You'll be there?"

Mai didn't answer immediately. She didn't like committing to people. Commitment was a variable. Variables made systems unstable.

But she thought of the loop. Thought of how clean it had been. Thought of how, inside that room, reality had tried to squeeze itself into a smaller shape.

And she thought of how Ace had cut it without hesitation—*but only after Mai told her where.*

It wasn't romance. It wasn't destiny.

It was compatibility.

“Yes,” Mai said finally. “I’ll be there.”

Ace nodded once.

Not gratitude. Not relief.

Acknowledgment.

Mai pushed off the wall. “Let’s go before they decide we owe them a debrief.”

Ace picked up her cases.

As they walked back toward the elevator, Mai felt a familiar sensation settle into her chest—not warmth, not comfort. Something sharper and cleaner.

A new rule.

Not spoken aloud, but locked in.

If the world ever tightened again—if reality ever tried to fold—she wanted Ace nearby.

Because systems could be solved.

And sometimes, when they couldn’t...

...they could be cut.

The elevator doors clanged shut behind them, sealing them back into the humming throat of Tokyo.

Above, the city waited.

And Ace 1 was close enough now that Mai could almost feel its shadow moving toward them, quiet and inevitable.

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[ace](#), [mai](#), [bright](#)

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