



## Chapter 5: Pattern-Breakers

The circle didn't close with a clang.

It closed with agreement.

One moment, the stone under their boots was smooth and dead; the next it had decided to be a diagram. Lines rose from the floor like scars surfacing, glowing faintly with a gray-violet sheen. The geometry was clean, aggressive—no chalk, no paint, no human hand. The room was writing itself in real time.

Mai swore under her breath, and it wasn't fear. It was professional offense.

"You've got to be kidding me," she muttered, sweeping the disruptor across the forming sigils. The runes on her weapon flared and whined like they were tasting poison. "This isn't a circle. It's a compiler."

Ace's katanas hummed, emerald light reflecting off stone that suddenly looked too wet. She didn't step back. She didn't step forward. She held center like a nail hammered into the world.

Above them, the descending shape unfurled another layer—angles folding outward, shadow thickening into something that could almost be called shoulders. It wasn't a creature with flesh. It was a structure wearing the idea of a body.

Order had sent something new.

Not a priest.

Not a choir.

A pattern-engine.

Its voice slid down into the room like oil. "Do you understand what you're standing in?"

Mai lifted her chin. "Yeah. A mistake."

The engine's shadow edges sharpened, amused. "No. A lesson."

Ace's eyes stayed locked on it. "You're not teaching. You're testing."

The engine paused, as if surprised a prey animal had identified the trap's name.

"Correct," it said softly. "And you keep passing."

Mai's stance lowered, weight shifting with the careful balance of someone whose ribs were loudly protesting. Her pistol stayed up anyway.

Ace felt Violet under her ribs—quiet, watchful, like a smile behind a door. The river under ice wasn't calm because it was gone; it was calm because it was waiting.

The circle flared.

The three-beat rhythm surged back, louder now, threaded through the new geometry like a heartbeat pumped by a machine.

And then the floor moved.

Stone rose in four places around them, quick, sharp, forming low pylons that looked like speaker towers without speakers. Each one pulsed with the same gray-violet light as the circle lines.

Mai's eyes widened a fraction. "Resonance anchors."

Ace didn't like the word anchor in this context.

The engine's voice dipped, almost tender. "We learned from the ember vent. We learned from your disruptor. We learned from your refusal."

Mai snapped her gaze up. "You're talking like you're proud."

"I am," the engine said. "Pride is a form of worship."

Ace's voice came out low. "And worship is a form of hunger."

The engine's shadow face tilted. "Yes."

Then it moved.

Not stepping. Not falling.

It phased.

The air above the circle thickened, and the engine's body blurred, splitting into four ghosted positions at once—one over each pylon—like it was distributed across the anchors.

Mai hissed. "Oh, great. It's load-balanced."

Ace's grip tightened on her blades. "Mai—"

"I see it," Mai snapped. "We can't kill it as a body. We kill the pylons. Break the network."

The pylons pulsed again, brighter.

The circle lines flared.

And suddenly the air inside the circle became heavy, like someone had increased gravity by a few degrees. Mai's breath hitched. Ace felt it too—not enough to crush, but enough to slow. Enough to make motion feel expensive.

The engine's voice came from everywhere at once. "You move too fast, vessel. Let's see how you move when the city pushes back."

Ace's shadow-pressure aura surged reflexively against the weight.

The pressure in the room answered.

The circle pressed harder.

It was trying to compress her, to make her shadow-aura collapse inward until Violet's fragment could be forced outward like juice from fruit.

Ace's eyes flashed violet.

Her aura held.

Mai's fingers tightened on the disruptor. She didn't fire immediately—because firing without understanding was how you wasted your one good shot.

Instead, she watched the pylons, eyes tracking their pulse timing.

"They're in phase," Mai muttered. "All four. Same beat. That's dumb. That's arrogant."

Ace's mouth twitched. "Arrogance is predictable."

Mai nodded once, sharp. "Good. Predictable dies."

The first construct hit them.

It came up from the floor—not summoned from the shadows, not stepping in from a door. The stone inside the circle bulged and tore, and a shape erupted from it like a newborn nightmare. Human-ish proportions, too many joints, skin made of dark glass with violet veins running through it.

It didn't roar.

It sang.

A single note, high and thin, that made the circle lines flare brighter.

Mai flinched as the note pierced her ears.

Ace didn't flinch.

Ace moved.

She slid forward, blades flashing emerald, and cut the singer in half at the waist.

The body split.

But it didn't fall.

Its top half crawled forward on its hands, still singing, still trying to keep the circle's rhythm alive.

Mai's lips pulled back. "That's disgusting."

Ace stomped the top half's head into the stone with a burst of shadow-pressure.

The song snapped off like a cord cut.

The circle flickered.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Okay. So the constructs are contributing to the field."

Ace's voice was tight. "Then we cut the choir and the pylons."

Mai already had her thumb on a rune. "On my mark."

Another construct rose.

Then another.

Three of them, spaced out, forming their own internal triangle inside the circle.

The engine was building sub-patterns. Stacking geometry on geometry.

Mai's gaze flicked between them, fast. "It's layering. It wants us to get busy killing meat while the pylons do the real work."

Ace's answer was immediate. "Then we don't get busy."

Mai's mouth twitched. "I like you when you're mean."

Ace didn't have time to respond.

The three constructs attacked at once—one rushing Ace directly, one flanking Mai, one moving toward the pylons like it was trying to protect them.

Ace met the first with a clean parry—katana edge humming as it cut through glassy skin. She didn't

aim for kill; she aimed for disruption, slicing tendons, joints, points where the body needed continuity.

Mai fired at the second—not at its center mass, but at its knee. A disruptor pulse hit the joint, and the construct's leg simply forgot it was supposed to be attached. It collapsed, singing through broken teeth.

Mai swore again, louder. "Stop. Singing."

Ace slammed her aura down on the singer, pinning it.

"Now," Ace said.

Mai's eyes snapped to the pylons. She'd been counting their pulses.

"One...two...three..."

The pylons pulsed in perfect unison again.

Mai's grin flashed—brief, vicious. "Fourth is late."

Ace blinked, understanding instantly. "A lag."

Mai nodded. "A tiny lag. Like a heart skipping a beat."

Ace's aura tightened, compressing her presence into a smaller, denser point. She could feel Violet stir, curious, hungry at the compression—but it stayed behind the lock.

Ace used the compression as leverage.

She pushed.

A burst of shadow-pressure slammed outward, not at the constructs, not at the engine—at the circle's geometry itself, forcing it to stutter for a heartbeat.

The pylons' synchronization slipped.

That was all Mai needed.

Mai raised the disruptor and fired—not at one pylon, but at the space between three.

Triangulation.

The pulse struck empty air and detonated into a lattice of pale light that rippled outward, catching the three nearest pylons at once.

Their glow flickered.

Two pylons dimmed.

The third—shattered.

Not exploding. Just...coming apart as if the stone had decided it no longer wanted to be stone. It sloughed into dust and fell.

The engine's distributed presence faltered. One of its ghosted positions blinked out.

Mai breathed out hard. "Yes."

Ace didn't celebrate.

Because the circle reacted.

It didn't weaken.

It adapted.

The remaining three pylons flared brighter, compensating. The gravity-weight inside the circle intensified. Mai's knees bent involuntarily. Pain flared through her ribs. Ace felt pressure grind against her aura like sandpaper.

The engine's voice sharpened, less amused now. "You break one limb and think the body will die."

Ace's teeth clenched. "Bodies die all the time."

The engine descended lower, its shadow angles folding into a more solid shape, closer now, as if it wanted to lean over them and watch them strain.

"You're not fighting a body," it whispered. "You're fighting a design."

Mai's voice was strained but still sharp. "Good. Designs have flaws."

The engine's shadow face tilted toward Mai. "And you...architect. You are inconvenient."

Mai smiled through pain. "I know."

Then the engine did something cruel.

It shifted the rhythm.

The three-beat pulse stuttered, rearranged itself, and for a heartbeat Ace felt the rhythm match something inside her—not Violet, not her aura—something older. Something that tasted like candles and hymns.

Ace's vision flashed.

Red light.

A child's palms.

A voice saying vessel like it was love.

Ace's breath hitched.

Violet surged.

Not to take her hands.

To take that memory and use it.

Let me, Violet whispered, warm and eager. Let me show you what they did. Let me burn them for it.

Mai saw the hitch.

She saw it the way she saw everything—tiny changes, microscopic betrayals in body language.

“Ace,” Mai said, voice suddenly sharp. “Look at me.”

Ace’s eyes snapped to Mai.

Mai’s silver-blue gaze held hers, hard enough to stop a runaway train.

“Not now,” Mai said. “Not like this.”

Ace’s chest tightened.

The memory flickered again, trying to bloom.

Ace forced it down.

The lock inside her clicked, heavy and deliberate.

Violet snarled behind it, furious.

Ace’s voice came out rough. “Okay.”

Mai nodded once. Anchor locked.

Then Mai raised the disruptor again and aimed at the pylons.

Ace understood instantly.

Triangulation was their trick when they had time.

They didn’t have time.

So they needed something uglier.

Ace stepped forward, into the weight, into the grind, pushing her aura outward like she was pushing against a collapsing ceiling.

She moved one foot.

Then another.

Every step was a cost.

The engine watched, fascinated. “Yes,” it whispered. “Strain. Let it crack you.”

Ace didn’t answer.

She reached one of the pylons—closest one—and drove her katana into it.

Emerald light flared.

The pylon vibrated violently, trying to maintain its resonance.

Ace's second blade came down.

She didn't slice.

She cross-cut, blades forming an X, shadow-pressure compressing through the intersection point.

The pylon's stone screamed.

Then it shattered into dust.

The circle flickered again.

Gravity-weight eased slightly.

Mai exhaled hard and fired.

Her pulse struck the second pylon dead center.

It didn't shatter.

It inverted.

For half a second, the pylon's glow sucked inward like a black hole, then collapsed into nothing. The stone around it cracked, and the pylon simply ceased to be a coherent thing.

Two pylons down.

One left.

The engine's voice turned sharp, angry now. "Stop."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "Make me."

The engine lunged—finally moving like something with intent rather than structure. Shadow angles shot toward Ace like blades, aiming for her ribs, her throat, the places where Violet's fragment might be provoked outward.

Mai fired again, not at the engine, but at the shadow angles mid-flight.

The disruptor pulse made the angles wobble, lose cohesion, slow.

Ace slipped under them and drove both katanas into the final pylon.

The pylon flared blinding gray-violet.

For a heartbeat, the room felt like it was about to tear.

Violet surged again—thrilled by the brink.

Ace gritted her teeth and tightened the internal lock until her ribs ached.

Then she cut.

Emerald crossed gray-violet.

Shadow-pressure compressed.

The pylon shattered.

The circle lines went dark.

The gravity-weight vanished all at once.

Mai stumbled, catching herself, breath ragged.

The engine froze mid-lunge.

Its distributed structure faltered without anchors.

For the first time, it looked...vulnerable.

Mai lifted the disruptor. "Ace."

Ace didn't hesitate.

She stepped forward and struck the engine—not with a blade aimed at flesh, but with a cut aimed at pattern. The emerald arc sliced through its shadow geometry, severing the internal symmetries that held it together.

The engine screamed.

Not a human scream.

A structural collapse sound—like a bridge snapping.

It folded in on itself, shadow angles crumpling, trying to recompile without power.

Mai fired once more, dead center into the collapsing core.

The disruptor pulse hit, and reality canceled the engine's last coherent shape.

The shadow imploded into a thin smear of black dust that fell to the stone floor like ash.

Silence crashed down.

Not the sinister silence.

The after-battle silence.

Mai's shoulders sagged, just a fraction, then she straightened out of habit.

Ace stood over the ash, blades still humming.

Inside her ribs, Violet moved—quiet but not content.

You held me back, Violet whispered, sulky.

Ace didn't answer.

Mai stepped beside her, breathing hard. "We're not done."

Ace's gaze tracked to the edge of the room.

The figures in the shadows—the ones that had been humming—were still there.

But they weren't frozen anymore.

They were turning.

All of them.

Toward a single point in the darkness.

As if someone else had just entered the room.

Mai's disruptor lifted.

Ace's katanas angled outward.

The air at the far edge of the circle rippled.

And a familiar voice—human, smooth, priest-calm—spoke from the shadows.

"You break patterns beautifully," the priest said.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "You again."

The priest stepped into the edge of emerald light, collar immaculate, wrist now reinforced with a sleeker brace—Foundation-grade, almost.

And he smiled like he'd stolen something.

"I told you," he said softly. "Order learns."

Mai's gaze flicked to his wrist brace, then to Ace. "That's new."

Ace's voice was cold. "That's not yours."

The priest's smile widened.

"Oh," he said. "It is now."

Then he lifted his free hand—

—and snapped his fingers.

The ash on the floor rose.

Not drifting.

Moving.

Black dust climbed into the air in a tight spiral, coiling around Ace like a smoke serpent.

Mai fired instantly, pulse slicing through the dust—

—but the dust didn't scatter.

It absorbed the pulse, drank it, and grew darker.

Ace's shadow-pressure aura flared, pushing outward.

The dust answered.

It pressed back.

And Violet, under Ace's ribs, went very still.

Not calm.

Attentive.

Hungry.

Mai's voice went tight. "Ace...that's not just Order."

Ace's eyes flashed. "I know."

The priest's voice softened, almost kind. "Shall we see what the vessel does when she can't cut her way out?"

The dust tightened around Ace's torso like a corset.

Ace's breath hitched.

Mai stepped forward, disruptor raised, eyes furious.

"Touch her again," Mai said, voice low and lethal, "and I will dismantle you molecule by molecule."

The priest smiled like he enjoyed threats.

And the room—dead a moment ago—began to hum again.

Not three beats.

A new rhythm.

A rhythm that sounded uncomfortably like a hymn Ace had never learned...

...but Violet remembered perfectly.

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