



## Chapter 8: Make Your Own Door

The stone wall where the arch had been looked smug.

Smooth. Seamless. Like it had never been anything but a wall in its entire boring life.

Mai pressed her palm against it anyway, as if hatred could become a sensor. Her disruptor runes flickered, then settled into an angry, steady glow.

“No seam,” Mai said. “No hinge. No resonance gap. It’s not even pretending.”

Ace’s eyes tracked the wall, then the floor, then the ceiling-dark that wasn’t a ceiling. She listened with the part of her that didn’t need ears.

Behind them, the slit-hole pulsed again.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Not calling.

Measuring.

Mai glanced over her shoulder toward it, jaw tight. "It's keeping the drop open on purpose."

Ace nodded. "It wants me to think that's the only direction left."

Mai's mouth curled. "Cute."

Ace's shadow-pressure aura brushed outward, careful—like a hand sliding through tall grass. The room felt...layered. A trap built on top of a trap, geometry nested like a set of knives.

But beneath the geometry, there was something simpler.

A habit.

Order liked thresholds. Like rituals. Like doors.

Which meant the room had a door. It just wasn't visible.

"Mai," Ace said quietly, "give me a second."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "You're about to do something I won't like."

Ace didn't deny it. She just said, "Keep your tone running. If you feel the hymn start again—hard—shoot the air."

Mai blinked. "Shoot—"

"The air," Ace repeated. "Not at anything. Just...break their rhythm."

Mai's lips parted, ready to argue, then closed. "Fine. But if this gets you possessed, I'm taking your body and stapling it back together myself."

Ace's mouth twitched. "Comforting."

Mai lifted the disruptor and thumbed the interference sequence again. The gun's hum dropped into that low, grinding note—ugly, steady, stubborn.

Ace breathed.

In. Hold. Out.

The lock inside her was there, a heavy bolt she'd forged with her own will. Violet was behind it—quiet, attentive, like she was sitting with her back against the door, smiling.

Ace didn't open it.

She didn't need to.

She just needed to talk through it.

I know you're listening, Ace thought, not warmly. Not as a friend. As a fact.

A pressure touched the inside of her ribs. Violet's attention. Like a fingertip tapping glass.

Always, Violet purred, too pleased.

Ace kept her face calm. "I'm not giving you control."

I don't want control, Violet lied, smoothly. I want...space.

Ace almost laughed. Almost.

Instead she said, inside her head, Show me where the room is anchored. Show me the door they're hiding. You can look. You can't touch.

Violet's presence shifted, amused.

Ah. A loophole.

Call it a leash, Ace replied.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then the air in the room changed—subtle, like someone had opened a window in a house that had been sealed for years.

Ace's vision sharpened in a way that wasn't human. Edges became clearer. Shadow gradients became information. The stone floor wasn't just stone; it was a layer, a skin over something older.

Mai's hum-note wavered slightly as she noticed Ace's pupils change—just a fraction deeper, not glowing, but wrong enough to make her stomach clench.

"Ace," Mai warned, voice low.

Ace didn't look at her. "Still me," she said. "Watching."

Violet's perspective slid outward, and Ace felt it like borrowing someone else's eyes.

The room had anchors.

Not the pylons—those were temporary, built fast and loud.

The true anchors were quieter.

Four points, sunk into the walls where shadow pooled naturally. Not visible as objects, but visible as stress—places where the room's geometry tightened like knotted thread.

Ace's gaze flicked to one corner.

There.

A patch of darkness that looked normal until you stared too long—then you realized it didn't behave like shadow. It behaved like paint.

A fake.

An overlay.

"That," Ace whispered.

Mai followed her gaze. "What am I looking at?"

"A patch," Ace said. "A lie."

Mai's grip tightened. "So we shoot the lie?"

Ace nodded. "But not like before."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Meaning."

Ace took one step toward the corner. The three-beat pulse from the slit-hole behind them intensified, irritated by movement in the wrong direction.

Ace ignored it.

"The lie is stitched into the room," Ace said. "If you blast it, it'll absorb again."

Mai's mouth tightened. "So what, we ask it nicely?"

Ace's katanas hummed softly. "No."

She reached the corner and held her left katana out—not touching the dark patch, just close enough for emerald light to graze it.

The darkness didn't reflect the light.

It drank it.

Violet inside Ace purred. There it is. The stitch.

Ace felt it too now: a thin, invisible seam in the air, like a wire stretched tight.

Mai's disruptor hum-note deepened as she stepped in beside Ace, careful not to crowd. "Tell me what you need."

Ace exhaled slowly. "A cut. But not through stone."

Mai's eyes flicked to Ace's blade. "Through the seam."

Ace nodded.

Mai adjusted her grip and thumbed a different rune—one Ace had only seen her use once, in the warehouse, when she'd done that triangulation shot that made reality flinch.

Mai aimed—not at the dark patch itself, but at the space just beside it.

"On your swing," Mai murmured.

Ace's muscles tightened. Violet's borrowed sight held the seam steady in her mind like a bright thread.

Ace swung.

Not wide. Not dramatic. A short, precise cut—emerald blade slicing through empty air exactly where the seam was.

Mai fired at the same instant.

The disruptor pulse and the emerald arc met in the air.

And for a heartbeat, the room hiccupped.

The dark patch ripped open like fabric.

Behind it wasn't another corridor.

It was a thin slice of elsewhere—cold air, distant concrete, a smear of fluorescent light.

A service tunnel.

Real. Ugly. Human.

A door.

Mai's breath punched out. "There!"

The room reacted immediately.

The ceiling-dark thickened, boiling downward like storm clouds gathering mass. The edge-figures—the choir remnants—stirred again, twitching like they'd been reconnected to power.

And the slit-hole behind them pulsed harder.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

The breath from below returned—closer now, like something exhaling up a shaft.

Mai didn't hesitate. She shoved the disruptor into Ace's hands for half a second—not surrendering it, just using Ace as a third arm while she grabbed Ace's sleeve and yanked.

"Move," Mai snapped.

Ace moved.

They dove through the rip in the wall.

The air on the other side slammed cold into their lungs. The tunnel was narrow, industrial, lined with cables and emergency lights that flickered in a normal, boring way. The smell was water and oil and concrete—sweet relief.

Mai stumbled, bracing herself against the wall, ribs screaming. Ace turned instantly, blades up, ready for the rip to follow them.

The rip did follow.

The tear in the air behind them widened as the room tried to reclaim them—like a mouth refusing to let go of food.

From inside the tear, darkness boiled.

Not the engine. Not the priest.

Something else.

A pressure, a presence, the sensation of a hand pushing through the fabric of a world.

Mai raised the disruptor again, hands shaking with effort now. "Ace—"

Ace didn't wait for the question.

She stepped to the edge of the tear and slammed both katanas into the air—crossed like an X—right where the seam had been.

Emerald light flared.

She wasn't cutting a thing with mass.

She was cutting permission.

Mai understood and fired into the center of the X.

The pulse detonated inward.

The tear shrank violently, like a wound cauterizing.

But before it closed—

A face appeared in the darkness.

Not human.

Not mimic-smooth.

A suggestion of a face, formed by shadow and geometry, and behind it—violet glimmers like deep water reflecting stars.

It didn't speak with a mouth.

It spoke into Ace's ribs.

Vessel.

The word landed in Ace's chest like a hook.

Violet surged behind the lock, sudden and eager, not to seize control—just to answer.

Ace's hands tightened on the sword hilts until the leather creaked.

"No," Ace hissed, aloud this time.

Mai's voice snapped. "Ace!"

Ace forced her eyes away from the face and into Mai's gaze.

Anchor.

Mai's expression was furious and terrified and there.

Ace used it like a rope.

She yanked herself back from the hook inside her ribs and pushed shadow-pressure outward—hard, decisive—into the closing tear.

The tear snapped shut.

The tunnel went quiet except for their breathing.

For two seconds, nothing moved.

Then the emergency lights flickered once, stuttered, and stabilized.

Mai slid down the wall until she was sitting, chest heaving. “Okay,” she breathed. “Okay. That’s...new.”

Ace stood in front of her like a shield, blades still up, eyes scanning the tunnel ends.

“It wasn’t the priest,” Mai said, voice rough. “That thing—whatever it was—”

“I know,” Ace said.

Mai’s gaze lifted to Ace’s face. “It called you vessel.”

Ace didn’t deny it.

Mai swallowed, jaw tightening. “And Violet—”

“I felt her,” Ace said, voice flat. “She wanted to answer.”

Mai’s hand clenched into a fist on her knee. “But she didn’t.”

Ace looked down at her.

A faint tremor ran through Ace’s fingers—not fear, not weakness. Adrenaline aftermath. The cost of holding a door shut inside yourself while another door tries to open.

“I didn’t let her,” Ace said.

Mai exhaled, shaky. Then, very quietly: “Good.”

Ace’s comm unit crackled suddenly, loud in the narrow tunnel.

“—ACE—MAI—” Bright’s voice came through, distorted but present. “I’ve got you back. Signal reacquired. Where the hell are you?”

Mai barked a laugh that turned into a wince. “In a tunnel, Bright. Like always. Tell your building to stop eating us.”

Bright’s voice tightened. “We saw a spike. A localized breach signature. Then it collapsed. Did you close it?”

Ace stared at the blank concrete ahead. “We slammed it shut.”

Bright paused. “With what?”

Mai's voice was dry. "Teamwork and spite."

Bright didn't laugh. He sounded tired in a way that made the hair on Ace's neck lift.

"Listen," Bright said. "You need to get out. Now. We're reading movement in your vicinity that doesn't match any known entity profile. And—" he hesitated, then said it anyway, "—we're getting a faint harmonic echo that resembles the Tokyo subway incident's pattern, but...cleaner."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Cleaner as in refined."

"Cleaner as in tuned," Bright said.

Ace's stomach tightened.

Because tuned meant someone had taken the chaos and made it a tool.

Mai pushed herself up the wall, wincing, then standing anyway. "Route?"

Bright's voice was fast now, clipped. "Follow the tunnel for ninety meters. You'll hit a service ladder. Up two levels. There's an access hatch into a maintenance corridor—Foundation team will meet you."

Mai glanced at Ace. "Move."

They moved.

The tunnel stretched ahead, narrow and merciless, each footstep echoing just enough to feel watched. The air stayed cold. Normal cold.

But the three-beat pulse was still there.

Not in the tunnel.

In Ace.

A phantom rhythm in her ribs that wouldn't fully go away.

And Violet—quiet behind the lock—was smiling like she'd just heard her name spoken by someone who mattered.

As they reached the ladder, Ace looked back once.

Just once.

The tunnel behind them was empty.

No rip. No shadow.

No choir.

Only concrete and flickering light.

But the smell of incense was still faint in the air.

Like a reminder.

Like a promise.

And somewhere deep below, something exhaled again—so softly it could’ve been imagined—  
—except Ace felt it inside her teeth.

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