



Chapter 31 — Down Again

Municipal Six smelled like wet concrete and old metal, the way it always did—like the city’s bones were sweating.

No helicopters this time. No flashy arrival. A plain van. A service door. A chain of manual locks that complained the whole way.

Perfect.

They moved in a tight little formation: Lehto and the second agent (Koskinen) ahead, tech in the middle with the analog case, Mai and Ace close, Halverson behind like a closing bracket.

Ace felt the pressure before any sound happened.

Just that familiar touch—finger on the key—testing if she would tense.

She didn’t.

She did something worse for it: she yawned. Not theatrical. Just tired-human, blunt.

Mai's eyes flicked to her for a fraction—approval without giving it the dignity of being praise.

They descended.

Stairs. Landings. Another bolt. Another door.

No screens.

No keycards.

No “helpful” beeps.

And still, the seam tried a clean trick: not sound, not voice—concept.

HURRY.

The thought landed in Ace's skull like it belonged there.

Ace didn't argue with it. She didn't internally debate. Debate gave it a foothold.

She slowed down.

Deliberately.

Mai did the same without being asked—two seconds behind Ace, then four, then one, breaking any possible “pair rhythm.”

Halverson's voice was low. “Good.”

They reached the lower corridor: the one that led toward the old culvert throat, the place where the city forgot to be civilized.

The air got colder. Dampness thickened.

The pressure increased—not dramatically, just enough to say: Yes. This is the place.

The tech set down the analog case and opened it. Mesh screens, paper tags, a hand-crank light that made a ridiculous clicking sound when turned.

Ace almost smiled. “That's obnoxious.”

Mai's tone was flat. “Obnoxious is now a defensive technology.”

Lehto pointed down the corridor. “Node is sixty meters. We stop at the marked line. No one crosses unless Mai calls it.”

Ace raised a brow. “Mai calls it.”

Lehto didn't flinch. “Mai calls it.”

Halverson's mouth twitched, almost imperceptible.

They advanced.

Fifty meters.

The corridor widened into the service junction: pipes, a dark runoff channel, a concrete lip like the city was trying to keep something from climbing out.

And there—on the damp sheen of the runoff water—Ace saw the watcher.

A tall subtraction in the reflection.

Still.

Watching.

Ace didn't say "observer." She didn't want that word to become her reflex.

She said, flat, "Reflection contact."

Mai didn't look at the water. She looked at Ace's face and used that as her sensor. "Duration."

"Brief," Ace said. "Present."

Mai nodded once and wrote nothing—too much writing became a ritual down here. She just lifted two fingers to Halverson: logged.

Halverson acknowledged with a slight head tilt.

Then the seam did what it had been saving its energy for.

A sound, quiet and intimate:

A hinge.

Not a door slam. Not a knock. The micro-squeal of a hinge that had been opened slowly by someone trying not to wake a sleeping house.

Ace's skin crawled.

Mai's jaw tightened.

Lehto's hand drifted toward his weapon and stopped—because weapons weren't the problem. Doors were.

The hinge sound continued—soft, steady, patient.

And then, on the far wall of the junction, the concrete began to look wrong.

Not moving. Not cracking.

Just... developing an outline.

A rectangle that shouldn't exist.

Edges sharpening as if the wall had decided it was tired of being a wall.

Ace's mouth went cold. "That's the breach."

Mai’s voice was calm and lethal. “That’s the hinge.”

Halverson’s tone dropped. “No one speaks to it. No one bargains. We do the work.”

The rectangle’s edges brightened—faint, colorless, like absence taking shape.

And inside Ace’s skull, the seam placed a thought as clean as a command:

OPEN IT.

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