



Chapter 32 — The Breach

Ace didn't answer the command.

She didn't even reject it in words.

She made a short, ugly sound—half scoff, half laugh—cut off fast.

Mai cleared her throat hard, a sharp human noise with no meaning.

The command blurred, irritated, like a sentence losing its grammar.

The rectangle on the wall sharpened anyway.

The hinge sound deepened—closer now, as if the hinge was inside the concrete.

Koskinen muttered something under his breath—an instinctive swear—and Halverson snapped his fingers once, hard, to break the “human rhythm” forming.

“No scripts,” Halverson said. “No comfort. No bravado.”

Mai stepped forward to the marked line and stopped. She didn’t cross. She didn’t approach like she was answering a knock.

She set down a roll of tape and a strip of metal chain, then looked at Ace.

“Anchor,” Mai said, quiet. Not ritual. Instruction.

Ace stepped to Mai’s side. Their wrists touched—brief, real. Not romance. Not comfort. Reality.

The tech cranked the hand light; it clicked and clacked like an angry toy.

Lehto held up a paper tag with a crude shape drawn on it—not a circle. Not a rectangle. Something broken-cornered, asymmetrical.

Mai tore tape strips and laid them down in that shape at her feet—an ugly boundary, deliberately imperfect.

The seam reacted.

The hinge sound became a little happier.

That made Ace’s stomach twist.

“It likes chores,” Ace murmured.

Mai didn’t reply. She just pressed the final tape strip down and—without drama—placed a steel washer in the center like bait.

The rectangle in the wall pulsed. The edges thickened, as if the breach was trying to become a door with conviction.

And then the water in the runoff channel rose.

Not fast like a flood. Fast like a decision.

Ace watched it climb the concrete lip and felt the old animal part of her brain scream: Leave.

But leaving because it told you to leave was still obedience.

Mai’s hand tightened on Ace’s wrist once—anchor pressure.

Ace breathed in.

Breathed out.

Chose the weight of her harness.

Chose the ache in her shoulder.

Chose offense.

The seam pushed again:

OPEN IT. OPEN IT. OPEN—

It tried to turn repetition into inevitability.

Ace did not let it.

She stepped one foot forward—inside Mai’s ugly boundary shape—and drew one katana.

Just one.

Not both.

Because both would be a pattern.

The blade’s green glow cut the damp air, painting the concrete with poisonous light.

The rectangle flinched.

Not physically. Conceptually.

Mai raised her disruptor pistol—not aimed at the “door,” but at the edge where the idea of door lived.

“On my mark,” Mai said.

Halverson’s voice, low: “Make it expensive.”

Ace moved like she was tired of being polite.

She slashed—not at the wall like it was stone, but at the outline like it was a diagram. A hard cut across the top edge, then a second cut down the side, deliberately off-angle, ruining symmetry.

The hinge sound squealed, offended.

The water surged higher.

Mai fired.

The disruptor pulse didn’t look like a bullet. It looked like a refusal made visible—silver-white energy that struck the edge and unwrote part of the rectangle’s certainty.

The outline shuddered.

The hinge sound stuttered.

For a heartbeat, the breach tried a different tactic:

A voice in the air behind them, warm and worn—

“Mai. Please.”

Bright’s voice.

Perfect.

Ace’s skin went cold.

Mai's posture didn't even twitch.

She didn't look back. She didn't answer.

She made a sudden, harsh cough—ugly, human—and snapped her fingers once, different rhythm than Halverson's earlier snap.

The voice warped into static and died.

Ace felt her jaw tighten so hard it hurt.

Good.

Pain was truth.

The rectangle tried to "complete" itself again, edges crawling back into place like a wound trying to close wrong.

Ace switched hands mid-motion—breaking her own rhythm—and drew the second katana.

Two blades now. Green light doubled. The air felt like it had teeth.

Ace murmured, almost conversational, "Sorry, sisters. This is work."

Mai shot her the briefest side glance—later—and then focused.

Ace crossed the blades and cut an X through the center of the outline, deliberately ruining the idea of "hinge side" and "latch side."

Mai fired again—this time into the lower corner.

The concrete wall didn't explode.

It simply stopped agreeing to be a door.

The rectangle's edges fuzzed. Thinned. Lost authority.

The hinge sound turned into a grinding squeal, and then—like a hand yanked away at the last second—silence.

The water dropped.

Not gradually. Instantly, like the corridor had exhaled.

Ace held her stance for two seconds longer than necessary, then stepped back out of the boundary shape.

Mai peeled the tape up immediately—no reverence, no "closing ritual"—balling it into a crumpled mess.

The tech cranked the light again, faster, as if noise could keep the seam from regaining traction.

Halverson's voice was low, steady. "Status."

Mai's answer was clinical. "Outline collapsed. Water receded. Pressure baseline dropping."

Ace swallowed once. “It tried Bright.”

Halverson’s jaw tightened. “Logged.”

Lehto looked at the wall—now just wall—and exhaled like a man who didn’t believe relief was safe. “Is it gone.”

Mai didn’t lie. “It’s withdrawn.”

Ace’s mouth went thin. “It’s not gone.”

No one argued.

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