

## ## Chapter 2 - Fractured Screens

The city's bigger heart beat a few districts away: a business hub stacked in glass and cooled air, arteries of traffic threaded between camera poles like sewing needles. Ace and Mai took the high route in—service stairs, half-locked doors, a ladder with one rung that warned you in rust—and came up on a rooftop two blocks from the intersection Bright had flagged.

Bright's tip had come as a coordinate dump with a single line appended: **"You'll want to see the timing."** No signature. No apology.

From the roof's edge, they watched the timing.

Four crosswalks, eight lanes, twelve traffic cams, and one billboard bigger than the bus depot—all of it moving in a perfect, murderous ballet. The lights shifted in unnervingly regular pulses. Cars eased to halts and starts like someone had wrapped a metronome around the city's neck. Pedestrians stacked themselves in neat phalanxes at curb edges, disregarding the logic of rain and human impatience. Twice, drivers anticipating the rhythm tapped gas too soon, and twice, collisions nearly bloomed before the alignment tugged their ankles and gentled their reflexes.

"They're not stopping accidents," Mai said, damp silver strands sticking to her lips. "They're stopping \*noise.\*"

Ace scanned the camera poles, left hand resting on the higher katana's hilt to steady its eager hum. "And trading it for obedience. Bad deal."

Mai had gutted the radio unit and rebuilt it twice since the metro. Its guts showed like a surgery that had gone well in spite of the tools. She threaded one more wire around a dangling charm—her grandmother's looped knot reproduced in copper—and slotted a fresh battery with a click that sounded like intention.

"We take junction B first," she said, pointing with her chin. "It's the aggregator for these eight. We can't kill everything from here, but we can make them forget what symmetry looks like."

"Music to my knives," Ace murmured.

They dropped down from the roof via a fire escape that complained about the world in groans and flakes of paint. At street level, the rain had thinned to a fine mist that made everything feel recently baptized and slightly undeserved. A bored security guard smoked beneath a camera and didn't look up when they passed. The access hatch for the junction box had four screws and a municipal sticker promising a fine so large it would make you wish for smaller sins.

Mai listened at the metal panel—not for sound, but for rhythm. She touched the hatch, then her own pulse at her throat, then the hatch again. "Count?"

Ace went wrong on purpose: "Three, seven, four."

The hatch's lock released with a soft, gratified click—as if nobody had asked it a question in its own language for a very long time. Inside, a bank of converters hummed, little red LEDs blinking on the beat. Mai grimaced, then slid her device's connector into a maintenance port.

"Ugly coming online," she said under her breath. "If the mesh sticks, reflections start to stutter. Cameras fall out of sync with their own predictions. I can't promise it won't also crash someone's blender."

“Collateral toast,” Ace said. “We’ll live with it.”

The billboard above the intersection shifted to a new ad: a woman running on a beach, clouds arranged in mathematically impossible formations, tide lines straight as rulers. The camera’s red pinpricks pulsed in time with her feet.

Mai keyed in the filter.

For one second, nothing changed. For two, the city held its breath.

Then the reflections went wrong.

On screen, the runner’s left foot landed a frame late. Her smile stuttered into the uncanny valley and kept falling. The traffic cams jolted, tried to regain lockstep, and failed. The light cycle hiccupped and recovered at a slightly different interval, just enough to break the internal metronome in the bodies at the curb. A man at the front of the pack took a step at the “wrong” second and didn’t die for it. His shoulders rolled back as if remembering what weight was supposed to feel like. A woman laughed once, short and sharp, at nothing at all.

Above them all, a hair-thin crimson line crept into the corner of the billboard like a strand of silk pulling itself into view. It thickened, working with nightmare patience toward the center.

Mai’s tablet chirped. A second window popped up—something had decided it wanted to talk to them.

The billboard’s ad sloughed away like old skin. A blank field took its place, white with a faint pearlescent sheen. Then a pair of hands came into frame—gloved, graceful, impossibly clean. They folded together, fingertips kissing precisely. No rings. No scars.

“Hello,” said a voice that belonged to church basements and conditioning lectures. The sound came from every cam’s tiny speaker, a whisper that still managed to fill the air. “Littering in the public square is impolite.”

Ace stepped so her body blocked Mai from the nearest camera. The diagonal on Ace’s wrist was still a pink line, swollen from the bite. Violet stirred at the sight of those hands with a flash of amusement and hunger both.

“Clean Hands,” Ace said.

On the billboard, the gloved hands turned palm-up to display spotless lifelines. “We don’t use names we haven’t earned. It creates a mess. But you two—oh, you’ve become such \*vectors.\*” The hands clapped once, dainty and dead. “The Foundation finally learned to count.”

Another chirp from Mai’s tablet—an injection, a ping, a push. She swore softly. “They’re trying to handshake the device. Don’t—” She broke off as her phone lit on its own in her pocket, bright as a lightning strike. She fumbled it out, thumb already moving to kill every radio signal it had, but the lockscreen refused to hear her. Numbers began to pulse, gentle as a lullaby: **2 4 6 8**.

The voice softened, velvet folded over a blade. “Little engineer. Let me optimize. Even integers only. So smooth. So safe.”

Mai’s breath snagged once, barely visible. The numbers kept pulsing, and her thumb hovered—exactly as the loop wanted—waiting for even seconds to touch, to comply, to surrender a little more autonomy for the pleasure of being right in the eyes of a machine.

Ace caught the tension like a scent. Her hand closed over Mai's. "Look at me."

Mai did, and the spell jerked like a puppet snapped upright. Ace took the phone, flipped the mirror cam on, and raised it so their faces reflected—hers sharp and pale with the violet flecks in her eyes dimmed to embers, Mai's lined with concentration and that bleeding edge of fear she refused to name.

Ace traced quickly with her nail across the glass: the square, the diagonal, the tiny tooth. The screen jittered, lines warping around the wrongness. The counting numbers smeared, failed to align, and vanished, leaving only the dumb, confused reflection of two women who did not want to be told how to breathe.

Mai exhaled, long and deliberate. "Firewall," she said, hoarse but steady.

On the billboard, the white field opened like an eye. For a moment the "pupil" was a perfect circle; then Mai's filter tore it into an oval, then something uglier. The gloved hands twitched.

"So messy," the voice said, equal parts condemnation and longing. "Order is a kindness. Do you know what the world does without it? Have you seen the riots when left to your toothy—little—freedoms?"

Ace smiled with only one side of her mouth. "I've seen your kind of peace. It breaks bones in even lengths."

The hands stilled. "You will be measured. You will be isolated. The calibration will cure you."

"And if we say no?" Mai asked.

The gloved fingers curled into a prayer. "Then we will iron your love flat until it stops catching."

Violet sank her teeth into a laugh in the back of Ace's head. \*Let me. Just a cut. Let me green the feed and make her fingers bleed through silk.\*

Not yet, Ace told her. She felt Violet's sulk like a cat turning away but staying in the room.

Mai rolled her shoulders like a boxer between rounds. "Give me thirty seconds."

Ace nodded once.

Mai worked. The dissonance app—she had started calling it that without asking permission from the world—was bone-simple on the surface and baroque beneath. It shoved noise into reflection algorithms, made edges crawl, demanded that cameras question whether what they saw was complete. She reached deeper now, using the aggregator's permissions against the grid itself. Her runes hummed in the device's metal, a faint counterpoint to the whistle of rain in the wires.

"Five," she said, too soon, and Ace knew that meant \*now.\*

The billboard tore.

Not physically—not with that satisfying rip of cloth—but in the way a dream tears when you name the wrong thing. The white field seamed along two aching diagonals. The gloved hands blurred, fingers multiplying into a stuttering bloom. For a heartbeat there were too many hands to count. For the next, there were none.

The ad bled back in, but distorted. The runner's perfect beach had grown rocks, jagged and intrusive. Her teeth were slightly crooked if you squinted. The sky forgot its geometry.

On the street below, people faltered. Some shrugged and went on. Some laughed because laughter was what their bodies had been denied for about four minutes. One woman stepped out of line without looking to see if anyone would punish her for it. Nobody did.

Mai looked down at the tablet and let out a breath that made her shoulders drop. "We're in their head. For now."

Ace's phone vibrated again, a spiteful insistence against her palm. Another Foundation memo, stripped to the bone: **VECTORS A-LOCK / M-RED CONFIRMED. INITIATE SEPARATION DRONES. ISOLATE OR BE ISOLATED.**

"They're escalating," Ace said.

"Then so do we." Mai wiped rain from her mouth with the back of her hand. "If they bring drones, we bring **everyone.**"

She tipped her head at the billboard. Its ad had settled into a stubbornly imperfect loop: every third frame a smear, every eighth frame a frame and a half. "Public glitch," she said. "People saw it. They'll talk. We seed the app wide—simplify the interface, drop the code into dead-simple installers, hide it on a dozen sites Bright's people and Kaarlo's weird friends use. Two taps. No permissions. An option to print chalk patterns and hang them in windows for the cameras to choke on."

Ace looked past her at the crosswalks. Two teenagers had chalk now—no idea where they'd found it in the rain—and were drawing squares on the curb lip. The lines smeared wet, diagonal a fraction too long. One kid looked up at the billboard, saw the smear, and grinned.

"That's our billboard," Ace said softly. "Not theirs."

The billboard blinked. The gloved hands came back for all of two frames—enough to cross the fingers into a rigid, ungenerous blessing—then vanished under a surge that smelled, if you could smell images, like hot dust and envy.

"Clean Hands will try another feed soon," Mai said. "Different angle, different ad inventory. Doesn't matter. The mesh is noisy. She'll hate it."

"She already does," Ace said.

They moved. Two junctions down, another hatch, another wrong count, another mess jammed into a civic artery. The city resisted, then remembered it had been born feral. Horns started to honk out of sequence—first irritation, then play. A cyclist cut a corner, glanced up at the billboard, and decided to veer again *\*just because\**. A busker tuned his guitar wrong on purpose and laughed when it sounded better.

The first drone came in low over the intersection, black and municipal, with **CALIBRATION** stenciled down its side as if that could turn a threat into a service. It opened with a click like a polite door, spreading a grid of light across the crosswalk—ghost threads, tidy boxes.

Mai didn't need telling. The dissonance app spat a burst of pattern into the drone's depth sensors that made its grid strobe, then swirl into something that looked like a child's first attempt at a maze and felt like relief. The drone slid sideways, lost altitude, caught itself, and retreated to a height where

disobedience looked like weather.

Another drone drifted into view behind it. Ace watched the sky fill with little bureaucrats.

“Bright’s leak won’t hold them off long,” she said. “We need the crowd with us.”

“They already are,” Mai said, chin pointing at the kids with chalk. “We just have to give them an excuse.”

Ace stepped into the crosswalk as the lights argued about what color they wanted to be. She didn’t draw steel—no war with machines yet—but she drew herself taller, the shadow around her waking up like a cat from a nap. She pointed at the curb and mimed a diagonal with two fingers. The teenagers saluted her with ridiculous solemnity and added a tiny tooth to their crooked lines.

The second drone tried to paint her with a measuring grid. It flickered on her shoulder and died like a firefly that had lost its reason for insisting.

A woman in a yellow coat clapped once—tentative. Then again, louder. The crowd laughed, not together, not in unison, but in a scatter that made the drones hesitate because their predictive models didn’t want to commit to anything ugly.

Mai’s tablet pinged one last time. A new window, not Foundation, not Clean Hands, nothing familiar—just a breadcrumb of code signed by a key she’d built for one person and hadn’t given to him.

**BRIGHT:** \*Next hub is the river-facing data center. Your mesh hurt them. They’re going cloud. If you’re going to be brave, be fast.\*

Mai’s mouth hardened. She flicked the message to Ace, who read it and nodded.

“Then we go,” Ace said.

They caught a last glance at the billboard. The ad had given up on pretending to be aspirational. It showed a blank field now, but not white—off-white, a difficult color paint stores call something like \*bone\* because nobody wants to say \*stain.\* Across it, someone had overlaid a crooked square and a diagonal and a small, stubborn tooth, as if the building itself had learned to draw.

“Public glitch,” Mai repeated, satisfaction in the low of her voice. “Grassroots on.”

They left the intersection louder than they had found it. Somewhere behind them a bus driver leaned on a horn and made up a rhythm. A phone in a stranger’s pocket tried to count even, failed, and shut up. The rain gathered itself for another try at obedience and fell crooked instead.

Clean Hands would come back with prettier lies. The Foundation would send cleaner threats. The city would keep remembering itself in ragged pieces.

Ace and Mai moved toward the river, toward the data center Bright had named, toward a cloud that needed learning how to storm without becoming a hymn. Violet coiled quiet in Ace’s head for now, listening like a predator who has decided to enjoy the whole hunt.

Above them, far too high for chalk, a tiny light on a drone blinked out of sequence and stayed that way. —

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Last update: **16/03/2026 18:01**

