

Chapter 6 – Separation Index

The corporate district had the exhausted glow of a place that never admitted it closed.

Glass towers leaned over each other like clean lies. The sidewalks were too wide. The planters too curated. Every surface had been designed to imply health, efficiency, and a very expensive kind of peace. The rain polished everything until it looked new enough to trust and old enough to bill for.

Ace hated it on sight.

Mai hated it on diagnostics.

“It’s dense,” she said, staring at the tablet as the overlay crowded itself into unreadable knots. “The cameras are cross-talking. HVAC, traffic poles, lobby mirrors, elevator glass, everything. This isn’t just surveillance. It’s a behavior engine.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning if one system likes your posture, the others learn it. Fast.”

They had slowed to a casual walk for appearances. Here, every deviation mattered. You could feel the district looking without using eyes. Doors registered pace. Screens registered head angle. Even the silent electric buses tracked how long people held their gaze on public notices.

A giant wall display on the side of a bank cycled through rotating wellness slogans in sterile white text:

BREATHE EASILY. CHOOSE CALM. TRUST THE SYSTEM THAT CARES.

Then, for one frame only:

A-LOCK / M-RED PRIORITY INDEX

The slogan returned immediately after, but Ace had already seen it.

“So much for subtle,” she said.

Mai’s fingers tightened around the tablet. “They’re distributing our tags through shared public infrastructure. If the district catches our gait signatures, every reflective surface north of the river starts talking.”

“Then we stop walking like ourselves.”

Mai looked at her. “Can you?”

Ace gave her a sideways smirk. “Watch me.”

They crossed the next block wrong on purpose.

Ace shortened one stride, lengthened the next, added a slight outward swing to her shoulders she would normally consider theatrical malpractice. Mai shifted her weight forward, then back, disrupting the precise economy of motion the systems had likely already started mapping.

The nearest camera hesitated.

A second camera picked up the feed and disagreed.

At the lobby of an insurance tower, a reflective glass panel rendered Ace too tall and Mai half a beat late.

“Masking works,” Mai said quietly.

“For now.”

The district answered with drones.

Not two this time.

Five.

Three high. Two low. They emerged from behind a parking structure in a smooth formation that looked almost ceremonial, like swans designed by a procurement office. Their underside sensors bloomed pale grids over the pavement, searching not just for position now but for relational distance.

Mai caught the pattern instantly. “They’re indexing us as a pair.”

Ace did not slow. “Can they be wrong?”

“Only if we are.”

A small park broke the block ahead—corporate green space, all trimmed hedges and expensive benches no one ever sat on for fun. At its center stood a sculpture made of mirrored steel curves pretending to be abstract thought. Rain slicked the metal into a hundred distorted selves.

Mai pointed once. “There.”

They cut through the park.

The low drones followed.

The sculpture did the rest.

Every sensor line that crossed its surface bent. Distances doubled, halved, folded back. Ace’s shadow became three people for half a second. Mai’s profile bounced between surfaces and returned with contradictory shoulder angles and impossible hand positions. The drone formation broke trying to reconcile them.

Mai stopped beneath the mirrored arc, shoved the dissonance device against its support column, and pulsed the mesh upward through the metal.

The entire sculpture shimmered.

Not visually.

Structurally.

Its reflections stopped flattering. Every surface went a little mean. Lines warped. Depth misbehaved. The low drones drifted in too far, corrected, and nearly collided nose to nose.

“Public art,” Ace said approvingly. “Finally useful.”

A woman in a tan coat sitting on a nearby bench looked up from her phone just in time to see one of the drones spin half a meter off-axis. Instead of being alarmed, she smiled—a small, private, delighted expression usually reserved for seeing rich people embarrassed.

Then she took a piece of chalk from her handbag and drew a crooked square on the edge of the bench as if she had been waiting all day for permission.

Mai saw it and huffed a laugh she did not have time for.

The high drones held formation longer. They were running cleaner prediction models, drawing from building arrays, not just local sensors. One projected a guidance field over the park path, trying to suggest movement choices to the pedestrians below. The choices were gentle. Safer. Cleaner.

And dead on arrival.

Ace stepped exactly where the field did not want her to.

The projection bent around her shin and lost a corner.

She took another step, this one too wide.

The field broke.

A man in office shoes immediately veered off the approved route and cut across wet grass, ruining his trousers and visibly enjoying it.

The district hated improvisation.

Good.

Mai’s side-channel chimed again.

BRIGHT: THEY’RE BUILDING A SEPARATION PROFILE. DON’T LET THEM MODEL YOUR DISTANCE. STAY TOUCHING OR STAY UNREADABLE. PREFERABLY BOTH.

Mai showed Ace the screen.

Ace considered that for exactly one second before catching Mai’s wrist with her free hand.

“There,” she said. “Let them model that.”

The contact was immediate, grounding, and profoundly irritating to the system.

One of the low drones stuttered.

Its grid tried to define them as two units, then one, then failed to choose. The software wanted a cleaner answer than reality offered. Ace and Mai moved as separate bodies with a shared vector. The prediction engine clearly found this morally offensive.

“Almost feel bad for it,” Ace said.

“You do not.”

“No.”

They left the park still hand-linked, cutting through a service lane behind the towers. Here the district’s polished face slipped and the machinery showed through: loading bays, HVAC exhaust, waste compactors that hummed with expensive restraint, cables disappearing into underground utility channels.

This was where the building breathed.

And where it lied less elegantly.

The green roof of the wellness complex came into view between two structures ahead—a terraced rise of curated moss and ornamental weather-resilient shrubs atop a glass atrium. Too much design effort. Too much money. The kind of building that wanted you to call it humane while it counted your heartbeat in the lobby.

“That’s it,” Mai said.

“Ugly from this angle too.”

“That’s how you know it’s real.”

They slowed before the final crossing. Here the camera density spiked. Parking entrance, loading dock, roofline units, lobby feed. Someone had decided this approach corridor mattered. Which meant Bright’s route was right.

A public display mounted on a concrete column lit as they passed.

Not a wellness slogan this time.

Just text.

Minimalist. Clean.

SEPARATION IS A FORM OF CARE.

Ace stopped dead.

Violet moved under her skin like a blade turning in its sheath.

There she is, the whisper said, velvet over teeth. The woman who irons love flat and calls it mercy.

Mai’s face gave away nothing, which meant she was furious.

“She’s talking directly now.”

“Good,” Ace said.

“Why good?”

Ace looked at the display. “Because it means we’re close enough to annoy her.”

Mai stared at the route overlays for another few seconds, then angled them into a simpler shape. Service lane. Utility fence. Blind corner. Door.

"The cameras on the front side want us seen," she said. "The back side wants us predicted. The service entrance wants us forgettable."

"Can it have all three?"

"No."

"Then we take the one it wants least."

The drones had regrouped again behind them. Not attacking. Herding.

Cantor didn't need to shoot if architecture could do the cruelty for them.

Ace tightened her grip briefly on Mai's wrist. "Lead on."

Mai nodded once.

They moved toward the back of the wellness complex, where service corridors met loading docks and the building's clean face thinned into utility.

Behind them, one drone blinked out of sequence.

Then another.

The district had started to forget how to count them.—

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