

Chapter 4 — Separation

The corridor didn't fork so much as decide it had always been two. The fire doors shivered in their tracks; the red knee-stripe kinked into a hairpin, and space took a careful breath.

"On three," Mai said again.

They moved on two. The geometry moved on one.

Ace felt the floor take her left foot like a river taking a leaf. Mai went right, their shoulders brushing for a bright instant, and then the world smoothed that contact away with bureaucratic efficiency. A seam slid between them as polite as a closing file. Ace grabbed for the fiber—caught it—felt it burn across her glove and then go slack in a way slack doesn't. The spool on Mai's side spun hard, then chunked and stopped as if a careful hand had pinched it.

"Mai—" Ace said.

"—here," came Mai's voice, but it arrived from two directions with half a beat between. "I'm—Ace, don't follow the echo."

"Copy." Ace breathed once through her teeth. The air tasted like dust and old ink and the metal of a nosebleed that hadn't happened yet. Bright was a scratch of sanded wood in her ear and then nothing, like someone had snapped the antenna off the night.

She chalked the wall at her shoulder—A →—and underlined it because it made her feel better. The mark sat, behaved. Good. "Stay on voice," she said, not bothering to whisper.

"Staying," Mai answered, close and far. "Anchor field's still holding at the last door. I'm carrying one scrambler hot."

Ace glanced back at the rails. The fire doors stayed up like good citizens. The red stripe straightened, smug. "I'll tell it to mind its manners."

She moved. The corridor that owned her now had a different spine—poured concrete veined with seams too regular to be mistakes, too deliberate to be plans. The fluorescents buzzed in that medical key that makes your jaw want to grind. Every fifteen steps a service niche broke the wall—broom, mop, a bucket with too many handles.

Ace kept to the center, shoulders loose, letting her stride slip off the grid so the floor couldn't predict her and get clever. She didn't draw steel; the blade hummed a little in the sheath anyway, the runes prickling like they were trying not to look impressed by the architecture. The violet flecks in her eyes warmed when the lights stuttered. She told whatever part of her that wanted to smirk wider to behave.

At the next T, both options were labeled RECORDS—SUB-BASEMENT in lettering that did not agree with itself about century or weight. The left corridor leaned one degree downhill while pretending to be level. The right had the faint whiff of wet paper after rain. She went right. If the building wanted to play scent, she would play with it.

"Mai?"

"Left," Mai said promptly. "My left. Which is not your right."

Ace smiled without humor. "We're going to have a talk with this place."

"It loves conversation," Mai said. "I'm pinning a five-meter bubble to push through a pinch point."

"Save juice." Ace hesitated, then chalked a second mark at knee height. The chalk crumbled damp against concrete. "Chalk's sulking."

"Copy," Mai said. "Mine ran when I blinked. Fiber's clean for now. Spool says twenty-two. The corridor says lies."

Ace passed an open doorway. It showed a narrow office the size of a confession booth: desk, chair, lamp. The lamp was on. There was a photograph on the desk in a cheap frame. Ace didn't look at the picture. She knew a hook when she saw one. She had been bait before.

"Left again," Mai's voice urged from the not-left.

"No," Ace said, and kept straight. The floor tried to make straight into a suggestion. She let her body be the argument. It was almost graceful, the way she and the wrongness negotiated.

Half the bulbs in the next run failed for exactly five heartbeats, long enough for the dark to have an opinion. When they came back, there was a silhouette at the far end of the hall. Her height. Her coat. Her exact impatience held in the loose set of shoulders. She felt the smile try to happen in her face.

"Cute," Ace said. Her voice came back to her thinner, like it had lost weight in transit.

The other Ace smirked—a hair too wide, teeth just that fraction too even—and when she said "Ace," the second syllable had Violet's undertone, the old warm-cold purr that said everything would be easier if you stopped fighting the tide.

Ace let the first half-step forward happen and then didn't take the second. "You're late," she told herself. "We already did this dance."

The silhouette tilted her head. There was the smallest click in the air, like someone setting a lens. For a blink the hallway lengthened like rubber. The other Ace didn't get bigger. She got closer. The violet undertone said, soft and fond, you don't always have to be small.

"Don't start," Ace said, and slid her hand to the blade's hilt. She didn't draw. She didn't need to. The runes hummed. The lights decided to be two percent brighter and failed. The alternate flinched like a photograph too close to a flash, then was gone, a polite edit leaving only wall.

"Ace?" Mai's voice again—alive this time, not a ventriloquist act, because it arrived from the one place voices come from when they have lungs. "I've got weather."

"Storm?" Ace asked. She picked up pace. The floor tried to rhyme with it; she broke the rhyme again.

"Mom's kitchen," Mai said, and the words were so flat Ace felt the pull in her own chest. "It smells like ginger tea. They're not good at the smell."

"Do not go in any kitchens," Ace said dryly. "I will ground you."

"I am older than you in my head," Mai said, softer now. "But yes."

Ace reached a cross-corridor and chose the one with the fewer doors. Doors were decisions; decisions here bent you if you let them. At the far end, where a wall pretended to be a wall, a ribbon of light

traced the seam like a smile. She chalked an arrow at ankle height. It bled a little. The building was sweating nerves.

She paused long enough to listen with her whole body. A low mechanical cadence—somewhere between pump and projector—ticked below her feet. Beneath that, lower, something like wind under a stage. And somewhere every few seconds a tiny sound like someone touching glass with a fingernail.

The next doorway held a room that wanted to be identical to the last office and had failed in three charming ways: the clock read 12:00 with no colon, the chair had one extra leg, and the photograph on the desk faced the wall as if ashamed. Ace stepped in, not touching anything, because the geometry wanted to do the touching and she was tired of letting rooms make the first move. She put a chalk A on the baseboard and looked up just as the mirror above the desk de-fogged from an invisible breath.

Her reflection looked back. It lifted a hand as she did, but the timing was half a beat late. The eyes were hers. The mouth wasn't, not in the way that matters. The smile tried again.

Ace's smirk came like a weapon. "Tell your friends the audition's over."

The mirror gave her nothing. That was the problem with rooms. Rooms never argued. They just insisted.

She left without offering the moment a second chance.

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Mai's corridor smelled like lightning that had learned to be indoors. The red knee-stripe along her wall did a shy little loop around an electrical cabinet and came back to itself with embarrassing enthusiasm. She wanted to laugh and didn't; her mouth was too dry. The scrambler in her hand throbbed a steady, reasonable rhythm—five seconds of local reality at the push of a thumb, a minute of recharge before it could behave that nicely again.

"Fiber count?" she asked, even though the numbers lied, because numbers were still a kind of prayer.

"Thirty," the spool told her. It shouldn't have been. It was. The line hummed faintly between her fingers like a very long string on a very patient instrument.

She chalked at shoulder height—M |—and the mark stayed, then glistened, then decided it was going to be a drip after all. "No," she told it quietly, and drew a second line through the first. The drip went wrong and aborted. Someone had taught her that trick when she was fifteen and angry at weather.

The door on her right was open. It showed a kitchen that wasn't this building's kitchen. Clean tiles; kettle on the stove; light through a window that did not exist in the annex. Her mother stood with her back to the door, hair pinned up with a cheap clip that always pinched. Her father's jacket hung on the chair he always left it on, shoulder seam repaired with gold thread because he liked that joke—kintsugi for cloth. You didn't put gold in repairs you were going to make again, he'd say. Guard your weak points with beauty.

"Mai," her mother called, like she had always called—just a little soft, as if the syllable might bite if you startled it. "Tea."

Mai stood in the hall and looked at the clip. It was on the wrong side. Her father's jacket cuff was rolled twice, not once and a half. The window light was warm when the weather in that memory had

been a storm's blue. She felt the exact contour of her want. Then she put the scrambler's cone on the threshold and thumbed the burst.

The room jerked like a bad TV trying to find channel. The kettle blinked into a coffee maker and then into nothing. The window turned into a photograph of a window taped to painted cinderblock. Her mother's back became the idea of a woman standing in a way a girl wanted, and then it wasn't.

"Nice try," Mai said softly. She stepped past and did not look back.

"Status," Bright's voice said, thinned into static's skeleton. "I've got... façade is... if it starts singing, don't... the... doors are..."

"Lost you," Mai breathed, and let the weight of that be exactly what it was. Ace would hate this building. Ace would love this fight. "Ace?"

"Here," Ace said, a strip of black velvet laid over a blade. "I've got mirrors lying to me. You?"

"Actors," Mai said. "Wrong props."

"Keep me."

"Always."

The corridor tilted its head at her like a dog. She chose the path with more fire equipment. Someone had once explained to her how code writes itself into buildings like spells. She trusted that more than she trusted murals. The red knee-stripe took her to a double door with wired glass. Through the glass she could see a stairwell landing and a wall sign with an arrow that pointed both directions and read YOU ARE HERE twice. She set the scrambler to a narrow pulse and pressed it to the glass. Reality obliged. The doors admitted her, and the landing had the decency to be flat.

Down the stairs, a door stood propped with a book: a bound volume labeled TAX ABATEMENTS 1967. The typography was wrong. The spine's library stamp was a font that hadn't been invented. Mai crouched, slid the book out with two fingers, and let the door swing almost closed before she stopped it with the toe of her boot. Wind breathed through. Somewhere below, metal ticked against metal, irregular as rain on three roofs.

She put the book back exactly as it had been, then drew a small ward in chalk on its spine. Not a Foundation sigil. Older. The shape her mother made on the inside of a wrist when a boatman lied about a storm. The chalk line shivered and then held.

"Ace?"

"I can hear you," Ace said. "If I stop, the floor tries to keep me."

"Keep moving," Mai said. "I'm coming downhill. I think we're spiraling the same drain."

"Romantic."

"Always." She smiled then, small and private, and went through.

The stair punched her into a corridor wide enough to drive a forklift. The fluorescents here had learned a new hum. Every time the pitch shifted, the walls took a millimeter more of the air. The fiber line at her glove tugged twice, then went very light, as if it had found a short cut without her.

"Don't you dare," she told it. The line minded her, for now.

Halfway down the forklift hall, a set of double swinging doors banged softly against themselves without wind. Behind them: a cold room full of flat files. The flat files were labeled with street names in a hand she didn't like. Beneath the hand labels, etched into the metal from manufacture, a different set of names in a language that didn't map comfortably to any she spoke. The top drawer of one case was open two inches. Inside, a stack of blueprints breathed—subtle rise and fall, like paper asleep.

Mai did not touch anything. She took a photograph. The flash did not go off. The camera decided it had no flash. She put the camera away.

"Ace, I've got handwriting that thinks it's a voice."

"I've got a door that thinks it's a mirror," Ace said. "We make a whole person."

"Easier that way."

There was a sound ahead, then—the sound of her name said from very far away by a voice trying to remember how to make music. It curled up the hall and tried to sit against her ear like a child leaning into a mother's side.

Mai stopped. The scrambler's charge was only half. The coil anchors were behind her. Her throat thought about being a throat. She listened for the second voice—the echo that was wrong. She didn't hear it. She heard only the crackle at the tail of Ace's breath, the way it always was when Ace was grinning and hated that she was.

"Straight?" Mai asked.

"Straight," Ace said. "No doors."

She went straight. The building tried to reward her with an easy choice. She didn't take it. The swinging doors banged again, softer. The flat files sighed. She kept going and the air stopped trying to be kind.

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Ace put her palm to a wall that had decided to be warmer than the air. The warmth moved under her hand like something alive and shy. She took it back. "No."

She had started talking to rooms when she was a kid. The rooms in her first city had been kind enough to pretend it mattered. This one listened for real. It came in close the way a crowd comes in close when a fight begins, all breath and interest.

"Ace—" Mai's voice began, then frayed into white. "—stairs—"

"I've got you," Ace said, and made the decision with her feet because the hallway was already trying to make it for her. She cut a corner that didn't exist and found herself on a mezzanine over something that should have been a reading room and was a pit now—concrete, rails, a sense that the building had pulled its guts in to protect something tender and monstrous.

Across the void a second mezzanine ran. On it, for a breath, a small black shape matched her stride exactly. It turned its head when she did. It lifted its hand when she did. It smiled when she did not, too

late, too much. The violet undertone in the air purred: you could be larger here.

Ace put two fingers to the hilt of her nearest blade and grounded herself on the very old sensation of promised violence waiting like a patient cat behind her shoulder. "I'm exactly the size I need to be," she told nobody the color of oil slicks. The other Ace flickered. The mezzanine was empty.

She reached the far door, chalked a small A that stayed where she put it, and went through into a corridor with walls that had been painted a decade ago someone loved the color ochre. The ochre was bleeding through fresh white. There were handprints in it. Children's. She did not stop. The building wanted her to slow down. Slowing down was how you learned to belong to a place that had not asked your permission.

"Mai," she said. "Knock for me."

Three sharp raps came twice. Concrete carries sound in a way wood never does: honest, gruff. The second set of raps lagged, like the echo wanted to get a word in. She followed the honest ones. The corridor pinched, then bowed, then opened onto a wall that had learned to be load-bearing just last week. Beyond it, the knocks were louder. They were close. Between them lay only new concrete and an old decision.

"I'm at a wall," she said.

"Me too," Mai said. "If I scambler—"

"It bends," Ace said. "It doesn't break."

There was a pause. She could see the shape of Mai's mouth in her mind, the line she made when she was adding columns in her head and one refused to carry properly. "We wait?"

"We breathe," Ace said. "We don't wait."

She put her palm to the wall. On the other side, after a heartbeat and then a half, a palm met hers. The concrete transmitted the pressure like a promise and a dare.

"Always," Mai said through six inches and a set of choices.

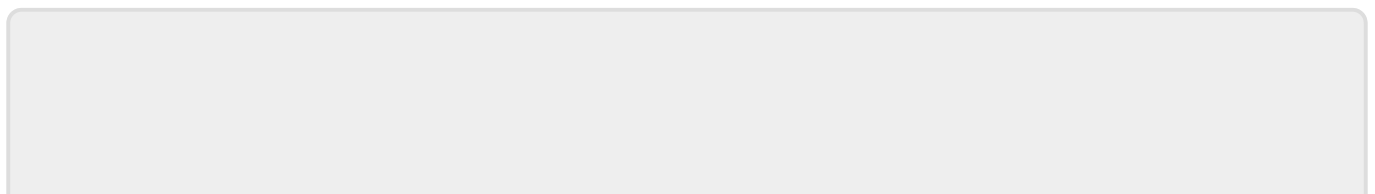
"Always," Ace said, and took her hand back like drawing a blade. The wall's hum shifted; the building, pleased with its own puzzle, tried something else. —

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