

Chapter 5 — Reunion

They didn't count to three. They counted to **now**.

"On my mark," Mai said, voice a calm wire through concrete. "Scrambler burst: three seconds. Then anchors—yours first, mine on the echo. Ready?"

Ace set her palm flat against the wall. The hum inside it had a patient cruelty—like a crowd that had decided to love you into being something else. "Ready."

Mai exhaled once. "Mark."

The scrambler thumped. The wall's song dropped half a tone, then tried to find itself again and failed. Ace felt it in the bones of her wrist. She slid the coil out of her kit, pressed it to the concrete beside her hand, and snapped the battery live. The air inside a meter went obedient and straight, lines behaving like they'd gone to finishing school.

"One," Mai said. On the half-beat—on the echo—her coil came up on her side. Geometry winced.

"Again," Mai said.

They pulsed it a second time. The wall remembered the idea of doors. It didn't open; it flinched. A seam that wasn't a seam thought about existing where their palms met.

"Third," Mai breathed.

Ace drew a tiny half-circle with chalk under her coil. Mai mirrored her. The twin shapes resonated through stone like two notes trying to become a chord. The concrete softened—not melted, not broke. It **gave**. Ace slid her fingers into a hairline where there had been none, found purchase like skin pulls when you take a splinter out, and pulled. The seam widened with reluctant sympathy.

"Hi," Ace said, and Mai's hand came through first, warm and present and **hers**. Ace caught it and didn't let go when the gap opened like a mouth discovering it could smile.

They were through in one movement, the seam closing a sulky inch behind them. Mai's scrambler coughed, battery red-lining. The coils both thumped once and died. Space, offended, tried to sulk them apart again. Ace put her back to the wall and her shoulder to Mai's, and the building accepted, for this breath, that the two of them were the thing it would have to push.

Mai didn't speak at first. She just leaned in that fraction. Ace felt a tremor move through her, not fear, not quite—voltage shedding to ground.

"You good?" Ace asked, voice somewhere low and private. The ochre bled on the wall did not get to hear it.

Mai nodded, a small, sure angle. "They tried my mother's kitchen."

"They tried my worst mirror." Ace's mouth tilted. "Bad casting both sides."

Mai's laugh was a puff of air at Ace's jaw. "Next time they should ask for our agents."

"Next time—" Ace began.

The floor made the sound shelves make when they begin to move. It came from the aisle ahead, not

behind—a compactus carriage rolling itself shut, aisle becoming narrow becoming none. Papers whispered like grass in wind.

“Later,” Mai said, and pulled back, the line of her shoulders knitting into their working angle. “We cut center.”

Ace peered into the aisle. The handwheel on the nearest carriage turned without a hand, steady and stubborn. Beyond it, another rack nudged forward, performing a tidy machine ballet. She could have outrun it. Outrunning was a way to let a thing have its form. She was tired of letting rooms choose the shape.

“Give me a count,” Ace said quietly.

“Three... two...” Mai hit the disruptor in a line along the tracks. The pulse rattled the metal’s sense of self; the wheel spasmed, turned a quarter back. Ace slid into the seam, planted one hand on the carriage’s end plate, and pushed. The rack fought like a polite bully. She did not argue. She **rearranged** the argument.

“Anchor?” Ace asked through her teeth.

“Dead for twenty seconds,” Mai said, moving past, setting a chalk hash on the end plate: M. *The chalk tried to smile; she corrected it without looking. “Fiber?” Ace checked the line with a tension she hadn’t known she was holding. It tugged back like a patient leash reunited with the dog that knows what walk means. “We’ve got it.” They broke into a wider corridor that had decided to be an interior lobby again: low ceiling; a dead potted plant that had become a wire sculpture of a dead potted plant; a water fountain that dispensed exactly one bead of water like a parable. Across the space, an access door on hydraulic arms yawned painfully slow, as if the building were forcing itself to be hospitable. Three cultists waited, masks folded crisp. One had a carpenter’s level in his hands like a baton. Another held a roll of architectural vellum like a priest holds scripture. The third had nothing visible but had the posture of someone who believes posture changes rooms. They watched Ace and Mai step through the last of the shelves. They didn’t rush. Rushing would have let the room own their pace. “You’re not supposed to stand together,” the level-holder said. His voice did a small thing on the word **together**, like a person with a bad tooth testing a sweet. “You break the rhythm.” Mai leveled the disruptor, chin a line of deliberate control. “We make our own rhythm.” Ace smiled without teeth. “And it’s catchier.” The man with the level moved first, fast and straight. He was better than the boys upstairs. The level hacked a clean arc for her temple. Ace stepped into him like she had always belonged in the space he wanted. She let the level miss her by a breath, let the blow spend itself, and paid it back with a shoulder that put his hips where his head thought they belonged. The second cultist unfurled the vellum with a shake; the room **listened** to the lines. The access door’s hydraulics sighed wider in sympathetic obedience. “Don’t,” Mai said, and stitched a narrow scrambler pulse along the vellum’s plane. The ink bled and then sulked back. The door forgot to keep opening. The cultist’s fingers jittered, script trembling into nonsense. The third one raised empty hands and **pushed**. Not air. Not energy. **Suggestion**. The lobby’s pattern tried to place Ace two inches to the left. She let the pattern happen to her and then refused to be the person it had placed. Her blade drew to half, green around the edge for a heartbeat—Violet purring like a cat that doesn’t forgive but will let you live. Ace took a breath and slid the steel back down. She didn’t need it. Not yet. The man blinked, wrong-footed, and Mai put him on his knees with a heel to the back of his calf and a wrist locked against a door jamb that had drifted into useful position. The lobby tried one more petty trick—making the floor rise at the exact spot where Ace wanted to step. She didn’t fight the rise. She took it as a gift, put a foot on it, and used the inch to bring her knee to the level-keeper’s gut with geometry’s own consent. He folded. She zip-tied two, Mai the third, the same brisk choreography as breathing. The access door stopped pretending, fully open now, the hydraulic arms groaning like a*

throat discovering it could sing. From beyond it came a change in air pressure and a sound like papers breathing in chorus. "Core," Mai said under her breath. "Choir pit," Ace said. "Of course." They didn't move yet. The pause wasn't hesitation. It was ritual: Mai's left hand on the side of Ace's throat for a second—pulse under callus; Ace's palm flattening briefly between Mai's shoulder blades. They heard each other. Then they let go. Bright's voice crawled back in like a creature under a door. "...van lost a door it never had. Facade's doing baroque. You're—" The word drowned in static and something like laughter that wasn't Bright's. "Still moving," Mai said, for his sake and theirs. "In two," Ace added. They went in. The annex's heart had decided it was a nave. The room rose and rose until the ceiling should have met sky and instead met itself. Filing racks had grown into pillars, drawers flowering out like organ pipes. Catwalks webbed the upper air in near-mathematical lattice. A mezzanine circled, then doubled back on its circle, a Möbius strip with bad manners. In the center of the floor, an area had been cleared the way people clear a space when they intend to use it for meaning. The cult's core was there: eight figures in a ragged octagon, masks crisped to hard geometry, clothes threaded with measuring tape like ceremonial sashes. They had chalked a plan on the floor—circles, lines, a box that refused to be a box and wouldn't become a circle. On a rolling cart, something small under a cloth pulsed like a heartbeat through velvet. The cloth had wards inked into it, careful and wrong. "Target," Mai said, very soft. Ace's eyes had already found the cart. She measured distances without thinking—floor plan in head; bodies for obstacles; shelves for cover that might decide to move if asked nicely and poorly. "The Architect," said one of the eight, a woman whose mask covered only half her face, the uncovered half decorated with spirals around the eye that made looking at her feel like falling. "He is listening. He will wake to a different idea of corridors." "We need less poetry," Ace said. "More doors that stay where doors go." The eight began to murmur. Not chant exactly. A professional hum, like printers waking in an office at 9:01. The room liked it. The filing pillars flexed; the mezzanine's railing did the polite little bow balconies do in opera houses when the lead enters. Mai popped a coil—not to full anchor, not here; a three-meter bubble would be a puddle in a sea. She chose a different trick—**tuning**. She powered the coil low and slid it along the floor, finding the pitch the room favored and nudging it a quarter tone off. The hum lost its confident center. A drawer on the nearest pillar opened, changed its mind, and shut again with a guilty snick. "Left flank," Mai said. "Two on me." "Six for me?" Ace asked, delighted. "You spoil me." "You're very high-maintenance," Mai said, and moved. It wasn't a charge. It was a change of opinion. Ace crossed the distance the way a storm crosses a map—nothing for a breath and then everything, a line tumbling over itself toward ground. The first masked figure on her side reached for something at his belt; she took his wrist and redirected him into the chalked plan, smearing a circle into a nervous oval. The second tried to backpedal into safety; there was no safety because the ground had never agreed to be ground in the first place. He tripped; she set him down gently against a drawer-face that peeled open and closed like a mouth trying to apologize. Mai's two came on neat as mechanics. She gave them **problems**. A tight scrambler pulse across the hinge of one knee—joint forgets its simple job; the body must renegotiate. A second pulse at the seam where mask met skin—vision swims; hands decide to hold onto air. Her pistol work was precise, a stitching down of the room's confidence more than of flesh. When one of the pair tried a wild swing, she caught his arm, rolled under, and sent him into a pillar with a lesson in leverage, then left him there with a zip tie and a ward drawn quick and clean on the steel. The mark glowed damp and stayed. The cart shivered. The cloth over it lifted a centimeter in a draft that didn't exist. The object under it punched a small, eager geometry into the air—three corners trying to be four, angles craving more of themselves. "Jack," Ace said, knowing he might be ash and breath in her ear. "If you're there: we're going to need your box." "Pelican," Bright said, voice suddenly **clear** like a line had found a window. "Back of the nave, left. I left it like a man leaves a ring at an altar." "Gross," Ace said, already moving. Mai threw a coil-burst low at Ace's feet, flattening a three-step path through a ripple about to turn a flat floor into a helpful ramp to nowhere. "Go." Ace took the path. A masked figure lunged from her right with a measuring tape, the metal end whipping like a tongue. She cut the tape with a flick of steel—just a nick, just enough; the tape snapped back into its case and bit the man's thumb. He yelped and learned about his own choices. At the back, the

Pelican case waited where Bright had said—tucked under a pillar like the world’s most sensible offering. Ace popped it one-handed, the latches snicking with the music of competence, and pulled the foam-lined interior free. The cloth inside the case had more careful lines than the one on the cult’s cart. The ink smelled like old hymns and fresh sin. She took it. The case was heavy; her arm liked it anyway. “Cover,” she said, and Mai said, “Always,” and made the room make sense for three seconds with a line of pulses so exact they might have been counted in lace. They reached the cart on that grace note. The cloth on it was hot to the touch. Ace didn’t flinch. “On three,” she said automatically, and they didn’t count. They moved together—lifting the wrong cloth, dropping the right, exchanging the song the room liked for the song it would have to learn. Under the cult’s cloth, the object was small enough to cup in two hands and too heavy to be small. It wasn’t a sphere and it wasn’t a cube. It had more edges than either. It had a personality you would not invite to dinner. It pulsed at the edges of sight in a rhythm that would have made a map jealous. Mai set the warded cloth like a decision. The pulse glared at them and then blinked, happily offended. The room drew a breath. The mezzanine intended to lean. The filing pillars hoped to become trees. The floor thought about waves. Ace put the Pelican beside the cart, open like a promise. “In, out,” she said. “On your hands,” Mai nodded. Their fingers closed on it together. It tried to be everywhere at once inside their grip—heavy and light, eager and sulk. The runes on Ace’s sheaths warmed; the etched lines on Mai’s pistol whispered against her palm. They breathed the same breath and lifted. The Architect pressed opinions through their bones. It wanted rooms. It told them about corridors in voices you could live in. It loved the idea of **more** the way some people love drowning. “Hush,” Mai said, and the word had the weight of someone taught by storms to speak to wind. “Inside voice.” Ace laughed—bright, fierce, hers—and together they folded the object into the waiting foam. The case accepted it with a little thud that felt like the moment a bad thought decides to be less important. Ace slapped the lid; the latches kissed shut. The room snarled. The mezzanine reconsidered gravity. The humming fluorescents tried to learn church music. “All right,” Ace said cheerfully to the architecture, as if speaking to a sulky child. “No tantrums.” The eight broke their neat octagon and tried to become problem-shaped. Three ran. Two froze in the exact shape of a person who has just realized their god is a tool. One leaped for the case as if momentum could defeat seals. Mai moved left, Ace right; their bodies solved the math without argument. The leaper went past where Ace had been and into a polite shoulder that put him into a drawer that shut firmly and then opened again in apology. Mai stepped through the path she had tuned and swept a knee. Zip ties spoke. The octagon became a pile. Bright’s voice came in like a hand through fog. “Status.” “Contained,” Mai said. Her breath hitched and steadied. “For now.” “Excellent,” Bright said, and you could hear the grin like a scratch on lacquer. “Little hiccup: the facade has decided it wants an annex of its own. I would encourage you and your new briefcase to consider the classic exit strategy: **leaving**.” Ace looked up. High along the mezzanine, something small and black watched. It was her shape and her patience, her tilt of head and the way she rested a hand on a sword she had not drawn. It smiled a fraction late, as if the room had to process the request. She let it be; she had the thing that mattered. She looked at Mai instead. The silver in her hair had stolen a thread of light and kept it. Dust made a crown on her lashes that she was too stubborn to blink away. The runes on her pistol were a quiet, warm bruise against her palm. She was here. **They** were here. “Way out,” Ace said. Mai rolled her shoulders, and the set of them said yes in a language no architect could draft. “Follow the fire code. And if it lies—” “We lie better,” Ace finished, and picked up the case. Together, they turned toward the door the room least wanted them to see. The nave leaned. The mezzanine sighed. The filing pillars considered becoming trees again. The building tried one last thing—something small and intimate. A whisper in Ace’s ear in her own voice, a suggestion sweet as syrup: you could stay and be larger. Ace didn’t slow. “I am the right size,” she said, and Mai’s knuckles brushed hers, and that was the whole truth between them for this room, for this chapter, for now. They ran for the exit, and the annex, sulking with the dignity of a genius denied an audience, began to decide how it would collapse when asked politely. —

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Last update: **16/03/2026 18:08**

