

CHAPTER 1 — Pre-Incident Briefing

The room was too quiet.

Not silent — never silent in a Foundation facility — but contained. Air filtered, pressure regulated, sound dampened into something that didn't quite belong to the outside world. Even footsteps seemed to decide, halfway through, that they shouldn't echo.

Mai noticed it first.

Not consciously. Not as a thought. Just a small internal adjustment — the kind she had learned not to ignore.

Ace didn't react.

She rarely did before something actually mattered.

Shammy tilted her head slightly, as if listening to something that wasn't there yet.

That was enough.

The briefing chamber was functional in the way all Foundation spaces were: precise angles, neutral tones, no unnecessary detail. A screen occupied the far wall, already active. Data scrolled, stopped, reconfigured itself into something cleaner. Controlled.

A man stood at the front.

Not introduced. Not needed.

Foundation.

“Target group: Serpent's Hand.”

No preamble.

No greetings.

Just the problem.

The screen shifted. Symbols, fragments, incomplete captures — ritual diagrams layered over architectural schematics. Something old drawn over something engineered.

“They have acquired multiple objects of unknown classification.”

A pause.

“Unknown,” he repeated, as if the word itself required emphasis.

That got Mai's attention.

Foundation didn't like that word.

Ace's gaze moved once, briefly, across the screen.

Not reading.

Measuring.

"They are preparing a coordinated breach attempt," the man continued. "Primary objective: Site-19."

Another shift. The diagram resolved into a structural cross-section.

"Keter wing."

No one reacted outwardly.

No one needed to.

The air in the room tightened by a fraction.

Not enough for anyone else to notice.

Shammy did.

"Method of breach: ritualized spatial displacement."

The phrasing was deliberate. Clean. Clinical.

It still meant the same thing.

"They intend to open a direct access point inside containment."

Mai spoke.

"From where."

Not a question of location.

A question of stability.

“Unknown.”

No hesitation.

“Ritual structure is partially obscured. Multiple layers. Non-linear components.”

The screen flickered — not a glitch, just a rapid reconfiguration.

“Previous attempts to model the structure have failed.”

Ace shifted her weight.

Barely.

“Then why does it work.”

The man looked at her for the first time.

“It hasn’t. Yet.”

A beat.

“We are not allowing it to.”

That wasn’t confidence.

That was policy.

The screen changed again.

This time, it wasn’t the ritual.

It was the site.

Exterior overlays. Entry points. Movement predictions. Red lines marking vectors that converged on a single internal coordinate.

“Strike teams will engage on multiple fronts,” the man said. “Primary objective: interrupt the ritual before anchor lock is achieved.”

Mai's eyes tracked the convergence point.

Too clean.

Too direct.

"And if the lock occurs."

The man didn't answer immediately.

He didn't need to.

"Then the breach becomes stable."

Silence again.

This time, heavier.

Shammy's voice cut through it, quiet.

"The pressure will shift."

The man didn't react.

Didn't acknowledge.

But he didn't dismiss it either.

"Yes."

The word sat there, heavier than it should have.

He continued.

“Secondary risk: unknown object interaction.”

The screen shifted back to fragments. Partial captures. Distortions that didn't quite align with the rest of the data.

“These objects do not correspond to known containment profiles.”

Mai leaned forward slightly.

Not interest.

Focus.

“Function.”

“Undetermined.”

A fraction of a pause.

“They appear to affect spatial consistency.”

That was enough.

Ace's gaze sharpened.

“How.”

“No stable pattern.”

Another shift. A recording fragment played — briefly. A corridor. Static overlay. The far wall... not where it should be.

Then it cut.

“Observation incomplete.”

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air around her shifted with it — subtle, almost imperceptible. Pressure equalizing without instruction.

“That’s not inconsistency,” she said.

Not loud.

Not soft.

Just certain.

“It’s disagreement.”

No one corrected her.

The man turned back to the screen.

“Your role is not engagement.”

That was directed. Clear.

At them.

“Primary teams will handle disruption.”

A beat.

“You are there to ensure the system does not escalate beyond control.”

Mai didn’t look away from the data.

“Define ‘beyond control.’”

Another pause.

Short.

Measured.

“When containment failure becomes non-local.”

Ace let out a quiet breath.

Almost a laugh.

Not quite.

“So we’re the line after the line breaks.”

The man met her gaze.

“Yes.”

No hesitation.

No attempt to soften it.

That was honest, at least.

The screen dimmed slightly.

Final overlay.

Entry timing.

“T-minus eleven minutes to insertion.”

The room shifted again.

Not physically.

Functionally.

Briefing was over.

No dismissal.

No “any questions.”

Foundation didn’t operate like that.

They knew what they needed to know.

Or enough of it.

Mai straightened.

The structure in her head was already forming — not complete, but usable. Variables, unknowns, failure points. The ritual was the center. Everything else would react to it.

Ace rolled her shoulders once.

Small movement.

Energy coiling, not released.

Shammy remained still for a moment longer.

Eyes unfocused.

Listening again.

Then:

“It’s already unstable.”

Not a guess.

Mai glanced at her.

“Baseline?”

“Shifting.”

A beat.

“Slow. But not contained.”

That was earlier than expected.

Ace didn't comment.

Didn't need to.

If it was already moving, then timing didn't matter anymore.

The man at the front didn't react to the exchange.

Or if he did, he didn't show it.

“Proceed to deployment.”

That was it.

They turned.

Together.

The door opened without sound.

Of course it did.

Outside, the corridor felt different.

Not wrong.

Not yet.

Just...

Less certain than it had been before.

No one said it.

They didn't need to.

The system was already under pressure.

And they were walking toward the point where it would either hold—

—or stop agreeing with itself entirely.

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Last update: **05/04/2026 14:13**

