

Chapter 2 — Into the Ruins

The river ran like a bruise under fog. The brownfield district rose from it in slabs—concrete, brick, glass filmed in the greasy sheen of a city that had forgotten its own name for this place. The civic records annex sat half a block in, a box of windows and ribs and bureaucratic boredom, except the boredom had started to dream.

Ace killed the van's engine and let the silence come up around them. The world sounded like a held breath.

"Line-of-sight first," Mai said, already sliding the side door open. She moved with clipped economy, pulling a collapsible mast, a relay puck, and the fiber spool from their foam nests. Bright took the mast without being asked and shouldered it like a flag.

"Height solves many problems," he murmured.

"So does honesty," Ace said, hopping down. Her boots touched grit and glass; the street ticked with the slow contraction of cooling metal. She rolled her shoulders, then reached back and eased one katana a thumb-width out of its sheath until the seal-work hummed and the blade's edge caught what little light there was.

The annex watched them. That was how it felt. The facade had the bland, tired face of municipal architecture everywhere, but the window grid didn't resolve cleanly if you stared too long. Rows had extra columns that weren't there when you blinked. The double doors were chained, and the chains looked longer than chains are.

Mai extended the mast, locked its segments, and set the relay puck onto its head with a neat twist. Bright braced the base against the curb while Mai guyed it with paracord. She punched the puck's face; a ring of LEDs woke like a cautious eye. "Relay live. Fiber in."

Ace took the chalk. She shook a stick loose, snapped it between her fingers, and palmed the halves. "Paint lies," she said, mostly to herself.

"Chalk lies less," Mai finished, checking the disruptor pistol's charge. Runes along the barrel breathed once under her thumb.

Bright glanced up the building, pendant resting against his tie. "If you start hearing your own voice giving better advice than I do, don't listen."

"We never do," Ace said. She set her palm to the chain. Cold bled up her skin. She could have sliced it in a breath, but Mai was already snapping open a case of non-ferromagnetic tools and working the lock like a pianist in a hurry. Two seconds; three; click. The chain hissed down and pooled on the steps like something relieved to be horizontal.

They pulled the doors. The darkness inside was a thing with weight. The lobby beyond was a slab of terrazzo, a long counter, a wall where plaques used to hang. The air smelled like wet paper and old toner and the sweet metallic note of dust that has learned to be a taste.

"Comms check," Mai said, tapping her earpiece. The relay gave her a clean tone. Bright's voice came through with a little ground hiss.

"Reading you," he said. "You're pretty on my little map. Try to stay pretty."

Ace stepped over the threshold. The sound was wrong at once. Her bootfall went out and came back half a beat late, like the echo had to find its way through a longer room. She made a small mark low on the jamb: A →. Mai mirrored it with M →.

“Hallway left,” Mai said, scanning. “Stairs ahead. Elevator dead.”

“Never trust a box that moves you on its own,” Ace said. She took the left. The hallway was lined with frosted glass doors, letters flayed by time: VITAL ST—, REC—, ARCH—. The floor’s checkerboard widened very slightly the further they walked, and the ceiling’s grid seemed to be counting something in a foreign base.

Mai ran the fiber out behind them, a thin dark thread that caught on nothing it should have and everything it shouldn’t. She chalked small hash marks at shoulder height—counting steps, counting turns. “If the plan shifts, numbers don’t,” she said under her breath. It was something her mother might have said about storms.

A door at the end of the hall was ajar. Ace’s eyes narrowed. There was light in there, a bare bulb hung too low above a desk that hadn’t been dusted in a decade and had new fingerprints on it anyway. The bulb swung slightly, windless.

“Company,” Ace murmured.

Mai angled, pistol low and close, elbows in. Ace flowed to the other side of the doorway, a black outline against reflected grey.

They moved as one. Ace went first in a blur, blade still sheathed, leading with the hilt. The man behind the desk had time to look surprised before the hilt clipped his wrist and the pistol he’d been pretending not to hold went skittering. Mai’s disruptor coughed once, a pulse that made the bulb squeal and the metal of the desk sing. The second man—mask, hood, a geometry of pins in his lapel—staggered, senses briefly scrambled, and Ace used the moment to put him on the floor without drama.

The room smelled like cheap incense and architectural blueprint ink. The walls were papered with photocopied floor plans. None of the plans matched each other. Half of them didn’t match the room they were in.

“Civic cosplayers,” Bright said in her ear, some distance and wind in his voice now that he’d stepped out to watch the facade. “Ask them who invited them to the prom.”

Ace put a boot on the wrist of the man trying to reach the pistol. “Who invited you to the prom.”

The man smiled through a split lip. He couldn’t have been more than twenty-five. His mask—a folded paper thing that made the face a hexagon—had been tugged down around his neck. He had drawn doorways on his skin in blue pen. “She did,” he said.

“Pronoun game,” Ace said. “Annoying. Names.”

“The Architect,” he said, as if speaking the word made him taller. His eyes glittered with a convert’s new heat. “It opened a mouth for us.”

Mai glanced once at the plans, then at the doorway. “How many of you.”

The man hesitated only a heartbeat, then overcompensated. “Enough.”

"So five," Ace said, and pressed her boot a little harder when his hand twitched. "Where."

He nodded toward the far wall—toward a file room that the plans suggested should be a short dead-end, five cabinets and a fire door. "Through."

Mai's brow furrowed. The air had a thickness to it. Heat wasn't the right word. Pressure wasn't either. It was like standing too close to a subwoofer, except the frequency was architecture.

"Time," Bright said. "Walls are doing a thing out here I don't love."

Mai looked at the men once more. "Sleep," she said, and snapped the disruptor to a tighter cone. The pulse made the filing cabinets shudder and the two on the floor exhale at the same time like puppets whose strings were briefly cut. They slumped. She holstered the pistol. "Two minutes."

Ace went for the file room door. It was the kind of door that usually sticks in summer and in winter and on Thursdays. It opened like it had been waiting for her specifically. The room beyond was long. Too long. Fluorescent lights buzzed above a corridor that had been a storage space yesterday and was a runway now. Boxes were stacked in careful towers that seemed to lean closer the further in you looked.

Mai laid the fiber along the threshold, chalked the jamb. "Breadcrumbs."

Ace took five steps in and stopped. The echo went out and didn't come back. She tilted her head. The left wall was closer than the right by half a shoe-length. The right wall was closer than the left by half a shoe-length. Perspective laughed at her.

"Stay on me," she said softly.

"Always," Mai said.

They went. Boxes gave way to shelves. Shelves gave way to a corridor of doorways, each opening into variations on the same small office: a desk, a chair, a clock stuck at different wrong times. In one, the desk was bolted to the ceiling. In another, the chair had too many legs. In a third, the window looked onto the street outside and showed no van at the curb.

"Bright," Mai said quietly, "does your van have a twin?"

"Unfortunately, no," Bright said. "Why."

"Because it's not in the window it should be in," Mai said. She kept walking anyway. If you stopped in here, the room would talk you into staying.

The corridor made a T without announcing it. Ace chose right, more on gut than signage. She chalked a small line on the left-hand wall as they passed. The chalk looked slightly damp, like the wall had been sweating.

"Footsteps," Mai whispered.

Ace was about to answer that yes, of course, theirs—when she heard a third cadence, a half-step out of sync, landing just after their own, like an echo that had learned to anticipate. It stopped when they stopped. It slipped when they slipped. It breathed when—

She turned fast. The corridor behind them was empty to the end, all the way to the room that now was not the room they had pushed through. For a thin second she thought she saw herself standing at

that far end—her height, her outline, the tilt of her head—and then the fluorescent buzz went up a note and the silhouette didn't exist.

Mai's mouth had tightened. "Comms still clean," she said, more for the record than reassurance.

"Keep them that way," Bright said, a little too quick. "If the building starts playing ventriloquist, I'll yank your string."

Ace felt something nick at the edge of her patience. "Jack," she said, "sing me a happy song instead."

He chuckled, but it was a thinner sound. "You're walking into the annex's interior lobby any second. The plans say it's a square. If it's a circle, don't be polite about it."

The lobby was not a square. It thought about being a circle and then decided circles were for the unimaginative. The space opened around them like a throat. A registration desk had multiplied into three, then a crescent, then a broken ring. Stanchions with velvet rope became a maze for a crowd that had never existed. A mural on the far wall showed a cityscape that looked unpleasantly like the one outside, except for the angles you could only get if you were building with mirrors.

There were three people waiting by the far stanchions. Two had the same paper masks as the men in the office; the third wore no mask at all. She had cut her hair blunt to the jaw and inked spirals around her eyes in thick black. Her hands were empty. Her posture said they weren't.

"Welcome," she said, voice echoing in a way the architecture liked.

Ace's blade came free with a whisper. Mai's pistol rose with the same breath. The woman spread her fingers, palms showing callus.

"The mouth opens wider the more you speak to it," the woman said. Her smile was too bright for the light. "We're teaching it language."

Mai's thumb flicked a selector on the disruptor. "Language has rules."

"Only if you want it to," the woman said, and flicked her wrist.

The two masked figures moved, but the room moved more. The stanchions slid, ropes fluttering like eels. The desk to Ace's left shunted six inches without sound. The floor's pattern shifted by a tile. It wasn't much—just enough to make a step land wrong, to make distance change underfoot.

Ace went through it. She didn't fight the floor; she let her body accept the wrongness and flowed with it, a small black storm skimming across a map that redraws itself. Her first cut used the flat—a reminder across a masked forearm that sang through bone and made a knife clatter. The second cut she didn't take—she ducked under a rope that wasn't where it had been and let Mai's pulse go past her shoulder.

The disruptor snapped and the room hated it. The mural hiccuped. The nearest desk jittered as if trying to be in two places and failing at both. The masked fighter nearest Mai turned his head the tiniest fraction too slow, and Mai stepped in, heel down, elbow tight, putting him on a knee and then on his face with efficient mercy.

Ace caught the second in a clinch between stanchion and desk, an angle that shouldn't have existed until it did, and sent him boneless with the pommel to the base of the skull. She felt the space tug at their shadows as if trying to remember how many they were supposed to be.

The woman didn't flinch. She looked past them, toward a door that wasn't a door until you decided to call it one. "It's learning," she said softly. "We all are."

"Put your hands on your head," Mai said, aiming center-mass. Her voice didn't rise. "Now."

The woman's painted eyes curved. "He's almost awake," she whispered—not to them. "He hates smallness."

Ace's skin prickled. "He who."

"The Architect," the woman breathed, like a lover saying a name into dark hair.

Bright's voice cut in, thin with distance. "Walls just added a window that didn't exist. I hate that trick. Status?"

"Two down," Mai said, never taking her eyes off the woman. "Third talking in italics."

"Copy," Bright said. "Recommend not letting her finish her sentence."

Ace moved. The woman did something with her hands that wasn't quite a gesture and wasn't quite a prayer. The space in front of her tilted the way a dream tilts just before you wake up, and Ace had to throw herself off-axis to keep the tilt from eating the step she needed. She hit the woman with the flat of her blade, fast and clean. The woman made a sound like someone who had just remembered the word for pain. She dropped.

The room sighed. That was the only word Ace had. It sighed and settled and then stretched again, not back to what it had been but out toward what it wanted to be next.

Mai stepped close, cuffed the woman with a zip tie, and eyed the door-that-wasn't. It had a little brass plaque beside it: RECORDS—SUB-BASEMENT. The letters were wrong for this building. They were wrong for this century.

"Sub-basement," Mai said.

"Because of course," Ace replied.

Mai exhaled. "Comms?"

"Shaky," Bright said. "You're two more walls from static. Fiber's still with you for now."

Mai touched the chalk to the edge of the plaque. The first stroke left a mark. The second didn't.

"Okay," she said, very calm. "Chalk sometimes lies, too."

Ace's smirk showed a tooth. "Then we lie better."

They moved toward the plaque. It didn't move away. That felt like generosity. When Ace put her hand to the door, the handle was cooler than the air. Somewhere behind them, very far down a hallway that was not here, footsteps tried to remember how to be theirs and failed by a breath.

Ace looked once at Mai. "Ready?"

Mai's eyes were steady; the silver in her hair caught a filament of dead fluorescent and made it look alive. "With you? Always."

They opened the door and went down. The building leaned in to listen. —

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