

Chapter 3 — Shifting Walls

The stairs to SUB-BASEMENT went down too far for the building that owned them. The steps were shallow, the kind made to be climbed by clerks carrying boxes, but the flight extended until the little hand on Ace's wristwatch walked from twelve to six. Fluorescents hummed overhead in a key that meant headache.

At the bottom, a corridor ran between banks of compact shelving—the kind on rails, with handwheels big enough to steer a ship. Labels ghosted from the ends of aisles: TAX ROLLS 1974–1982, PERMITS—NORTH WARD, UNCLAIMED. The smell was paper and oil and something colder, like the breath of an elevator shaft.

Mai checked signal—the relay tone came back thin—and clipped a small coil unit to the wall at the landing, powering it with a battery pack. The coil's field snapped into place with a ripple in the air, a neat bubble that made straight lines behave like themselves inside a three-meter radius.

"Anchor one," she said softly. "Local space pinned. Sixty seconds per burst if we need it."

Ace pressed chalk to the concrete, drew a short arrow and an A. The mark looked steady. Good. She glanced down the aisle and counted shelves without meaning to. It never helped, but counting kept hands from shaking.

"Spool," Mai said.

Ace took the fiber thread and fed it forward as they moved, an umbilical between them and the stair. The line went out with that discomfiting friction of something that should be slack but insisted on staying taut and patient and straight.

Halfway down the corridor the shelving shifted. Not much; not the theatrical roll you got when someone spun a wheel, just a nudge of steel that altered the little geometry you didn't think about—clearance for shoulders, room for breath. It made the hair on Ace's arms lift.

Mai froze, watching the gaps. "Hall's counting us."

"Let it do the math wrong," Ace murmured, and changed her stride by a fraction so her footfalls stopped matching the rhythm of the humming lamps.

They passed an open reading area: two tables, four chairs, a microfiche reader that had grown a second power switch. On the far wall, a fire plan in a plastic frame diagrammed the floor as a rectangle with pleasant little green arrows. Ace drew a diagonal line across the map with chalk without stopping. The line stayed where she put it. That felt like an insult accepted.

"Comms?" Mai asked.

Bright sounded farther away, like his mouth had moved into a pocket radio three rooms back. "Still with you. Facade just wrinkled. That's a technical term. How's my favorite basement?"

"Overdesigned," Ace said.

"Underfunded," Mai added.

"Ah, local government," Bright sighed. "Don't take elevators."

"We're walking," Ace said.

A whisper of movement ahead. Not the shelves this time. Shoes on polished concrete, very careful. Ace raised a hand without looking; Mai's disruptor came up, the rune-etchings a patient pulse under her thumb.

Two figures slid into view at the mouth of the next aisle, both masked in the same stiff paper geometry. One had a length of chain wrapped artfully around his forearm—ugly jewelry. The other held a carpenter's hammer like he'd only recently understood what hands were for. The chain man started to wind up something performative.

Ace gave him the wrong angle to perform into. She stepped inside the swing and took his balance at the knee with a low, efficient strike, then let his momentum sell him to the floor. The hammer man yelped, brought the head up shoulder-high—Mai's pulse caught the metal mid-lift and made it sing; the man's hands spasmed and he let go with an expression like betrayal.

"Don't," Ace told the one with the chain when he made a sound about trying again. He didn't, to his credit or his fear. She zip-tied wrists quick and quiet. The hammer man had a diagram of a door tattooed on his forearm in marker. The proportions were wrong. Too tall for any human room.

Mai scanned the air, not looking at the men. "Field is... viscous."

"Like moving through memory," Ace said.

The men stared up from the concrete. "He's listening," chain-man breathed through paper. "He likes your shapes."

"Tell him we're not furniture," Ace said, and stepped past.

They pressed deeper. The fiber line ticked over Ace's glove each meter like a metronome that didn't trust time anymore. Mai chalked marks at shoulder height every third shelf—short, neat dashes like heartbeat blips. One of them glistened, then ran, as if the wall had decided nobody would miss the mark if it slid an inch south.

"Chalk's sweating," Mai said.

"Room's nervous," Ace said.

The corridor took a slow left without changing direction. The shelves to their right continued straight, indifferent. They walked with the corner. The fluorescents buzzed, then clicked, as if the building had remembered a different song. In the click, Bright's voice skipped half a word.

"— walls... replicating signage. If you see an exit that says EXIT twice, don't use it."

"Copy," Mai said, automatically filing the advice between sensible and obvious. She glanced back. The fiber line ran away along the floor like a taught drawn line on paper. But... she frowned, stepped off to measure with her eye. "We've used twenty meters," she said, "in a corridor that's ten."

Ace didn't look. "We bring extra thread."

"It's not the running out I don't like," Mai said. "It's the book-keeping."

"Cheat later," Ace said, and at a branching—a three-way that made no sense with the building's sense—their bodies decided before their heads did. They chose the middle. It felt less wrong. Sometimes that was the diagnostic.

At the end of that run a door with no trim and no handle waited like a blank question. Mai thumbed a coil and slapped it to the wall beside the seam. The coil's field locked with a tiny thud you felt behind the teeth. Geometry hissed, irritated.

"Anchor two," Mai said. "Pop it."

Ace slid a non-ferrous pry bar from the toolkit, set it, leaned. The seam gave with the rubbery reluctance of warm gum. The door decided it wanted to be open after all. Beyond was not a room but a mezzanine catwalk along a shaft that had no business being inside a civic annex. It went down a dozen floors and up two. The catwalk was bolted to concrete that bulged like muscle. Far below, something clicked over and over, an automaton forgetting its line.

Ace's shoulders rose and fell. "If you drop me," she said conversationally, "I'm going to be very upset with you."

Mai's mouth did that small almost-smile that only Ace saw. "As if I'd ever."

They went single-file along the catwalk, Mai leading now for angles and sightlines. The fiber line hissed along the grating like a tame snake. On the far wall, a rectangular patch of darker concrete suggested a filled-in doorway big enough to ship a car through. Someone had written NO in chalk there. Beside it, faint and damp, someone else had written YES and drawn an arrow in the other direction. Mai added a third word—MAYBE—with a line under it. "For the committee," she muttered.

Halfway across, the air changed. It didn't get colder or warmer, not exactly. It got occupied. Ace looked across the shaft because some reflex insisted. On the opposite catwalk, exactly level with them, a small figure in black looked back. The tilt of the head was hers. The height was hers. The hair, the line of shoulder, the way the hand rested on a sword she had not drawn. For a moment she thought the figure smirked and the lights hummed and the image cancelled itself like a bad equation. There was only wall.

Mai hadn't seen; Ace didn't tell her. Not yet.

At the end of the catwalk a stair dropped to a landing marked ARCHIVES—SUB-02 on a sign that wasn't screwed in so much as grown out of the wall itself. The font belonged to a decade that hadn't happened. Mai tested the first step with a toe. It flexed and then remembered it was concrete.

Bright came back in a wash of static. "I'm losing you."

"Still hear you," Mai said. "You're slurring."

"Rude," Bright said faintly. "If the building begins addressing you by childhood nicknames, decline to answer."

They took the stairs. On SUB-02, the shelves sat tighter, the rails shinier, the handwheels oiled. The corridor pinched their shoulders and then apologized by widening just enough to let them breathe again. Ace chalked an arrow. The arrow pointed the wrong way when she looked again. She flipped it with a slash and didn't give the wall the satisfaction of a comment.

Something metal began to roll. The sound came like rain does, distant first, then behind your ear. One of the compactus carriages shuddered into motion three aisles down, slow and implacable: wheel turning on its own, racks yawning to meet, a mobile crush hazard with no one at the crank.

Mai darted to the wheel and hit it with a tight cone from the disruptor. The field stalled, reality

stuttered, the wheel twitched and stopped. The carriage quivered, decided to sulk. “Forty seconds,” she said. “Then it tries again.”

“Go,” Ace said.

They cut through the gap it had been closing, slid between shelves like moving through reeds. Paper whispered around them. The aisle opened into a small inspection bay—low table, stool, a lamp with a dust bonnet. On the table sat a cardboard box labelled RETURNS in a dozen hands. Inside: door handles, mismatched keys, two doorknobs that were the wrong lengths for any door in the human world, a brass plate engraved with UNIT 7—STAIRS (2 OF 3). Ace touched nothing. Mai photographed everything with a pocket cam and a muttered curse for archivists living and dead.

The compactus behind them twitched. Time was up. They cut left and then left again into a shorter aisle that shouldn't have existed, then into a cross-corridor that thought it was a lobby; a clock above it read 13:62, then erased the attempt.

“Fiber length?” Ace asked.

“Thirty-eight,” Mai said, and then, because it made her feel better, “Not possible.”

“In this house we celebrate imagination,” Ace said, and put a hand, light and quick, to the small of Mai's back as they moved. It was nothing in any tactical system. It was everything in theirs.

They came to a junction of four aisles, each labeled SUB-03 though the signs disagreed about where the hyphen went. In the center, a column rose from floor to ceiling, its face crowded with drawers like a library card catalog. Most of the drawers had no pulls. One, at eye level, had a ring of thin wire tied to it. Someone had written REMEMBER on the metal in pencil.

Mai met Ace's eyes. “Not today,” she said, and they didn't.

On the far side of the junction, a service door yawned an inch. As they approached, the inch became two out of good manners, and wind moved over their faces, though there was nowhere for wind to be. Voices rode the edge of the draft. Not speech, not really. The shapes your name makes in someone else's mouth when they haven't learned your language.

Ace heard her own voice say “left,” a fraction before Mai said, “Right.”

“I didn't say that,” Mai added, very calm.

“I know,” Ace said. “I like the version where you're actually here better.”

“Mutual.”

They pushed the service door. Beyond was a corridor of poured concrete that decided to be wider than it looked while you were walking through it. The fiber scraped and thumped and then went loose for three steps, as if they'd jumped a gap. Mai checked the spool. The numbers kept lying.

Down the new corridor, a red line painted at knee height ran along the wall—standard fire code stripe, suddenly a comfort. It took a corner and then another. It led them to a pair of rolling fire doors set in tracks in the ceiling. They were both up. Someone had stenciled DO NOT BLOCK above them in a hand warmer than regulation.

Mai frowned at the door housings. “These shouldn't be armed.”

"They going to be polite and stay up?" Ace asked.

Before Mai could answer, the lights skipped—a slow blink, like an animal considering a blink—and one of the doors clunked in its housing. Not much. Not enough to fall. Enough to remind them that gravity was a hobby and the building liked games.

"Anchor three," Mai said, already palming a coil. She slapped it to the wall beneath the track. Field up. Space behaved, sulking.

Bright's voice came back sanded down to grain. "...hearing you in... beat. If you get split, you—"

The radio knitted itself into quiet.

Mai's glance met Ace's. There was annoyance in it and a sheen of something like adrenaline holding breath. "We're about to—"

"—get cute," Ace finished.

The red line along the wall kinked, then continued, as if someone had tugged the paint with two fingers and smoothed it again. The nearest compactus down a side aisle sighed and rolled a centimeter of ancient paper toward them. Somewhere overhead, the building adjusted its shoulders.

The second fire door clunked.

"On three," Mai said, hand hovering by the control box that shouldn't have worked. "We slide. Together."

Ace's mouth tilted. "We always do."

They set their feet. Counted without speaking. On two, the lights hummed, on three the geometry disagreed with itself, and the corridor—the polite, municipal corridor with its kindly red line—made a decision about them that had nothing to do with doors or paint.

The rails grinned. The ceiling grid ticked. The floor came very slightly unfixed.

And the building, pleased with its own cleverness, began to open two different ways at once. —

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