

Chapter 6 — The Unbinding

The nave didn't like the Pelican being closed. You could feel the room pick at the latches with its attention. Catwalks creaked; drawers sighed; the chalked plan on the floor tried to convince itself back into coherence.

"Containment is a tourniquet," Mai said, eyes scanning the lattice. "We still have to stop the bleed."

"Four-point tune?" Ace asked.

Mai's mouth did that almost-smile. "Square inside a circle this stubborn? Rude. Effective."

They split without separating—three paces apart, a line between them that no geometry got to edit. Mai slid coils low and quiet across the floor, never letting one sing long enough to become a solo. Each burst was a nudge, a sustained quarter-tone of **no** against the nave's ambition. She chalked small wards that didn't belong to the Foundation—old shapes, boatwoman glyphs, the logic of weather—pinning each coil to the world with a grace note.

Ace walked the cult's diagram, reading it like a thief reads a map to a safe he intends to **change**. She cut lines with the tip of her sheathed blade, not severing chalk so much as insulting it, turning neat loops into broken thought. At the second point a drawer opened to bump her hip like a shy animal. She bumped it back and it remembered to be furniture.

"Point one," Mai murmured. "Point two."

"Three," Ace said, nudging a surveyor's tripod out of a circle like she'd moved a chess piece she didn't respect.

"Four," Mai finished, dropping the last coil and tuning it until the mezzanine railings hummed out of key. The room tried to lean. The pillars tried to be trees again. The coils insisted, one at a time, that pillars are not arboreal.

The eight cultists that hadn't run yet decided to chant, finally, and the chant was office noise turned holy: a photocopier warming, a printer spooler finding a job, a fluorescent buzzing itself brave. The nave liked it—until the square of tuned **no** closed with a soft, decisive click that only the room heard.

The cathedral exhaled.

It wasn't dramatic. No shudder, no shake. Just a reversal of pressure. The mezzanine remembered its bolts. The drawers remembered they were rectangles and kept that humble. The mural at the high end of the nave tried to show a future city and failed into the present.

Mai's eyes softened by a degree. "He can dream in the case," she said. "He doesn't get the whole building."

"Everyone needs boundaries," Ace agreed. She put a boot to the rolling cart and sent it into a pillar—gentle as vandalism. "Let's leave before it remembers it hates smallness."

From high along the mezzanine, something small and black watched. Ace didn't give it the satisfaction of looking back a second time.

"Exit vectors," Mai said, scanning for red stripes and the honest signage of fire code.

"The door the room least wants us to see," Ace said, and the lobby to their right developed a sudden

interest in being left.

They took the other way. —

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