

Chapter 1 — The Briefing

The safehouse wasn't on any Foundation manifest. It was a shuttered noodle bar at the end of a dead tram line, the kind of place that used to smell like broth and cigarette smoke and now smelled like damp wood and dust. Neon from a broken sign flickered behind the papered windows, strobes of pink and blue that made everything inside feel improperly alive.

Ace took a stool at the counter and spun it a quarter turn with her heel, watching the door in the mirrored strip behind the shelves. The glass threw her back at her—black hair, small frame, the impatient tilt of her mouth—and then threw the room back again. Mai leaned against the pass-through, rolling a thin length of gauze between her fingers. Her red jacket was patched at the elbow with duct tape that had collected lint like snow.

"Three minutes late," Mai said, not looking at the time. Her voice was low, almost a murmur. "Either he's making an entrance or we've been stood up."

Ace's smirk deepened. "If we've been stood up, I'm taking it personally."

"Everything is personal to you."

"That's because everything keeps trying to kill me."

Mai almost smiled. The neon stuttered; the mirror let the room blink. For a heartbeat Ace thought the reflection put Mai half a step to the left of where she actually stood. Then the door thumped, and sound snapped the scene back into place.

Dr. Jack Bright came in like he owned the deed to the building and a lien on the sky outside. A paper bag in one hand, a takeaway coffee in the other, and the ruby pendant at his throat flashing dark when the neon hiccupped. He tossed the bag onto the counter between them and slid onto the stool next to Ace.

"Pork buns," he announced. "Cold. Like my heart."

Mai raised a brow. "Gag gift for the autopsy?"

"For the briefing," he said, unwrapping one. "Protein helps with listening. Listening's hard."

Ace watched him chew. Bright was a handsome mess—tie crooked, hair one degree past carefree—but his eyes were sharp even when he pretended they weren't. He didn't take off the pendant. He never did.

"You said urgent," Ace prompted.

"I said interesting," Bright corrected, thumb sweeping a flake of pastry off the bar. "Urgent would imply someone else could handle it. Here we are."

Mai set the gauze down. "Talk."

Bright reached into his coat and pulled a folder from his jacket, setting it on the counter. It was heavier than paper deserved to be, edges lifted and softened by too many hands. A crisp white label read: SCP-184. Underneath: **The Architect.**

Mai's posture changed by a degree. Ace didn't move at all. Bright watched both reactions and looked delighted with himself.

"Field notes," he said. "Sanitized is the nice word. 'Redacted until it's almost useless' is the accurate one. But I figured you'd appreciate the folklore."

"Appreciate a working map more," Mai said, opening the file. Photographs and clipped reports slid like cards. The first image: a hallway that could not exist, a corridor bowed into an ellipse, doors bulging outward like the building was breathing.

Ace tapped the label with a nail. "Someone stole your paperweight."

"Not a paperweight." Bright sipped his coffee, made a face as if surprise: still too hot. "A small object with a big personality. When it makes friends with a structure, the structure grows... expressive."

"Expressive," Mai repeated.

"Ambitious," Bright amended. "You might say it has dreams it insists on realizing in three dimensions, never mind the math."

Ace turned a page. A stairwell spiraled into a throat of shadow, steps widening, landings multiplying like cells. Another photo showed a room that was either the same kitchen photographed from impossible angles or a set designer's nervous breakdown. Her violet-flecked eyes reflected in the gloss.

"Where," Ace said.

"Brownfield district on the river," Bright said. "Block of mid-century municipal buildings long since condemned and used for very wholesome activities by very unwholesome clubs. Two nights ago, a Foundation transit was hit. No casualties," he added, as if that helped, "but the case went missing. We've traced the bloom to a civic records annex in the middle of the block."

Mai's finger settled on a typed line. "Annex goes from three floors to... the estimate says *variable*. Your recon went in?"

"Recon looked in," Bright said. "Then recon looked again and didn't like being looked back at."

The room went still. Outside, a tram squealed on rust like a scream someone didn't want to make.

Ace leaned on the counter with her elbows. "Who hit the transit?"

He smiled, all teeth. "That's the beauty of it, Ace. We get to find out."

Mai's eyes flicked up, cold and clear. "Order splinter?"

"Or amateurs," Bright said, shrugging one shoulder. "Urban-myth hobbyists with money and no sense of proportion. Copycats. Or a private collector who thinks structurally induced madness is an investment class. I don't want to bias the read."

"You never want to bias the read," Ace said. "You just point and say 'fetch.'"

"And you always bring back something fascinating," he said lightly. "Which is why we keep doing this dance."

Mai closed the folder, palms flat. "Parameters?"

Bright brightened. "Now we're talking shop. All right. Constraint one: no heavy demolition. There are

occupancy questions we can't answer and structural behavior we don't fully model. Blast the wrong load-bearing fiction and you might turn one rabbit hole into twelve."

"Constraint two?" Mai asked.

"Comms will go unreliable once you're in the building's... mood." He wobbled his hand. "We can keep a line of sight relay from the street for a while. After that, you're alone together."

Ace tilted her head. "We do our best work alone together."

Bright's eyes danced to the pendant and back. "Good. Constraint three: if you see the object, do not touch it with your bare hands. I'm fond of both of you retaining your current shapes."

Mai's mouth quirked. "We've handled resonant artifacts before."

"Not like this one," he said. "This one makes rooms into ideas. It's charming until it's hungry."

Ace's smirk slipped a fraction. "You're doing that thing again."

"What thing?"

"Staging your sentences like misdirection. Laying out the cute metaphors so we forget to ask the ugly question."

He put a hand to his heart. "Ace. I would never."

Mai didn't smile. "How many teams?"

Bright tapped the coffee lid twice. "Two Foundation contractors declined entry after preliminary anomaly checks. No losses, just healthy fear. One local group went off-grid last week and hasn't pinged since. We don't know if they're inside the bloom or if they booked a ticket to warmer weather."

"So the ugly question," Ace said, "is how much bigger it gets if we don't walk in."

Bright's answer was immediate. "Bigger." He slid a Polaroid from his inner pocket and laid it beside the folder. It showed the annex's facade from across the street—a flat wall of windows, concrete ribs, a set of double doors chained shut. In the second Polaroid, taken from the same angle, the windows weren't quite in the same places. The ribs had an extra rib. The doors were deeper in shadow.

"Rate?" Mai asked.

"Unreliable," Bright said. "It pulses. Think tide rather than flood. I'd prefer to address the tide before it decides it wants a moon of its own."

Mai took a slow breath. The neon's flicker caught a pale shimmer in her eyes. "Gear request."

"Approved sight unseen," Bright said, making a flourish. "Except the part where I should see it."

"Portable disruptor coils, three. Two high-frequency scramblers for localized field collapse. A signal kite and a spool of fiber for breadcrumb relay. Toolkit with non-ferromagnetic hand tools. And—"

"Flare chalk," Ace cut in.

Mai glanced at her. "We have paint."

"Paint lies," Ace said. "Chalk lies less."

Bright's teeth showed again. "She's not wrong. Add chalk."

Mai nodded. "And something to quarantine the object. If we can get to it."

"Pelican case, triple warded, with a little love from Facilities and a pocket hymn or two," Bright said. "I have one in the car. Try not to scuff it; they always cry."

Ace's eyes slid to the pendant and back. "You're too cheerful."

"It's morning," Bright said.

"It's night," Mai said.

"For some of us," he allowed. "Look. You want a thesis? Fine. I think someone wanted to see what the Architect could do without adult supervision. They got it into a building that could grow without attracting attention. They expected a funhouse and instead they found a cathedral that hates being small. You two are very good at talking cathedrals down from ledges."

Ace tapped the folder. "And the part you're not saying?"

Bright met her gaze, and for a second the flippancy thinned. The neon moved across his face like the second hand of a guilty clock. "The part I'm not saying is that sometimes buildings that learn to dream don't want to wake up. And sometimes the things that come to listen at their windows aren't there for the architecture."

Silence laid itself down, light as dust.

Mai broke it. "We go in at dawn?"

"Now," Bright said, casual again. "Before the tide changes and the annex decides it needs a bell tower. I've got a van. I've got mediocre coffee. I've got two people I trust to come back when the building insists no one ever leaves."

Ace slid off the stool in one smooth motion, coat settling like a shadow finding its owner. The twin sheaths on her back whispered as they touched. "Trust is a strong word."

"For you, a compliment," Bright said, pushing to his feet. "For me, a coping mechanism."

Mai gathered the folder and tucked it into her pack, every movement neat. She checked the disruptor pistol at her hip, thumb grazing the etched runes as if they might hum back a blessing. "Extraction plan?"

"Street side," Bright said. "If comms go dead, we watch the walls. If the geometry does anything truly offensive, we improvise. You're excellent improvisers."

Ace looked at Mai. The room did that almost-imperceptible delay again, the mirror responding a quarter-beat late, like a drummer with a grudge. Ace decided she was tired. Or the neon was worse than it looked. "You good?"

Mai's eyes softened. "With you? Yes."

It was a simple line, almost nothing, but it landed in Ace like heat after cold. She rolled her shoulders, breath steadying in her chest. "Then let's go tell a building to use its inside voice."

Bright held the door and bowed them out with mock formality. The tram line outside cut the street into dull silver. Fog hung low along the river; the city had that particular hour's emptiness when even the pigeons pretended to sleep. The van waited under a dead streetlamp, a white box with a new scar on its bumper and Foundation plates that said they weren't Foundation plates.

Mai slid the side door open. Cases nested like black coffins inside, all buckles and seals and warning labels. Bright reached past her, hauled out the triple-warded Pelican, and popped it open just enough to show foam cutouts and a folded cloth inked with intricate lines.

"What hymn?" Mai asked.

"Old one," Bright said. "The kind no one remembers writing."

Ace caught his eye. "You ever going to tell us who wrote the first ones?"

Bright grinned. "Maybe after this. Maybe on a beach. Maybe at my retirement party."

"You're never retiring," Mai said.

"Not from management," he said cheerfully, setting the case back. He closed the van, smacked the panel twice like a superstition, and tossed Ace the van keys. She caught them without looking.

"You're driving," he said. "You're better at not hitting ghosts."

"There won't be any," Ace said, dry as bone.

"Of course not," Bright said, already walking around to the passenger side. "Just architecture."

Mai's shoulder brushed Ace's as they rounded to the front. It was a small contact, deliberate. In the noodle bar's window, their reflections fell into step a half-second late, then caught up as if embarrassed. Ace didn't look back.

They climbed in. The dashboard glowed weak green. The van coughed awake. As Ace eased it onto the tram-scarred street, Bright flicked the radio on and found only static. He turned it off.

"Tide's coming in," he said softly, almost to himself.

Ace set her jaw, eyes on the road. "Then we'll learn to swim." —

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