The Concourse

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Architecture, Book 4

Prelude

Adler sat down at her desk and opened the laptop. Three new messages. Two were students asking for more time. The third was Dana Shaw at the Concourse.

Subject: Recommendation request.

She read the email before she opened anything else.

They needed one female student on site after classes tomorrow. The work was paid. When a name was confirmed, a faculty partnership grant of twelve thousand dollars would post to Adler’s department account. The attached pages were the completed installation. If she had a student who matched, she should call.

She opened the file.

The first page was the main concourse downtown. Shops along one side. A coffee counter. A stone floor worn pale down the middle from years of shoes. In that walking lane, flush with the rest of the floor, sat a heavy metal grate. Under it, in a recess deep enough to take a woman’s body, a girl lay on her back, naked.

Nothing on her but the grate and the hardware.

Her arms were pulled out from her sides and fixed to the foundation. Her legs were open, knees apart, ankles fastened. Long blonde hair was spread under her head and over her shoulders. Her breasts were high and full. From the angle of the drawing you could see them clearly between the bars: the shape of them, the nipples, the way they rose when she breathed. Her waist was small. Her stomach was flat. The bars laid dark stripes across her skin and did not hide anything. Between her open legs a dark plate was seated against her, pressed to her so that every step on the grate would push there.

People were using the hall as if she were part of the floor. A man’s dress shoe was on the bars over her thigh. A woman’s heel stood on a bar across her stomach, the point of it above her navel. Another pair of shoes was coming into the frame. Nobody in the drawing was looking down yet. They were just walking.

Adler zoomed in.

The girl’s mouth was open a little. Her eyes were open. The plate sat tight enough that the drawing had shaded her wet around it.

Adler went to the second page.

Same girl from directly above. Face in the gap. Cheeks flushed. Breasts filling the spaces. The plate dark and glossy between her legs. Caption under the image: completed view, public hours.

Adler’s face was hot. She could feel her pulse in her neck and between her legs. She did not close the file.

She thought of Cassidy Lang.

She opened the Finance Society page. She advised the club. Last month’s mixer photos were still posted. She scrolled until she found the one by the windows.

Cassidy stood full length in the middle of the shot. Gold hair down her back. Pale blouse. Dark trousers. Heels. The blouse was tight across her chest. You could see the size of her breasts and the small waist where the cloth tucked in. Her hips and thighs showed in the trousers. A plastic cup hung from her fingers. She was not looking at the camera. She was already turning toward the door.

Adler put the photo next to the drawing.

Same chest. Same waist. Same long legs. In one picture Cassidy was holding a drink at a mixer. In the other a girl built like her was naked under traffic with a plate between her legs.

Adler saved the mixer photo and called the number in the email.

“Dana Shaw.”

“This is Nessa Adler. I read the request. I have the drawing open.”

“Good. Do you have someone?”

“I want to hear you say what I am looking at.”

“You are looking at the finished work,” Dana said. “She is naked in a recess in the main concourse floor. The grate locks over her, level with the stone, so people can walk the lane they already walk. The bars do not cover her. Anyone who looks down will see her breasts and her stomach and the plate and her face. The plate sits between her legs. When someone steps on the grate, she feels it there. We tell the tenants it is an art installation. She stays in the floor.”

Adler’s eyes were on the heel over the girl’s navel.

“I have a photo,” Adler said. “I am sending it.”

She sent the mixer picture. She heard Dana open it.

“Yes,” Dana said. “That is the body. What is her name?”

“Cassidy Lang. She is nineteen. She is in my Thursday section. She has the top grade. She leaves the room while I am still talking. She does not sit if she can stand.”

“You realize this is permanent,” Dana said. “If you put Cassidy Lang on my list, she does not come back to your class. She does not go back to that club. Her friends will not hear from her again. I need you to say you understand that before

I take the name.”

Adler looked at Cassidy’s turned shoulder in the photo. She looked at the naked girl under the grate. She was wet. She could feel it when she shifted in the chair.

“I understand,” she said.

“The grant posts when I confirm her. Twelve thousand to your department account. That is yours. What we pay Cassidy is for showing up tomorrow. After she is in the floor there is no paycheck to her. There is the hall.”

“What do I tell her?”

“Come to the main security desk after class. Use your name. It is paid. Call it an opportunity if you want. Do not describe the grate. Do not show her this drawing. If she sits in your office and hears that she will be naked under people’s shoes, she will not get in a car.”

“The drawing looks still,” Adler said. “Clean.”

“The drawing is for you and for the shop. Putting her in is rougher. Clothes off. On her back. Wrists and ankles bolted. Plate seated against her until it is tight. Grate dropped and locked while she is lying there in the hall. People will be walking already. I am not asking you to hold her down. I am asking you to send her.”

Adler did not look away from the mixer photo.

“I will send her,” she said.

“Say her full name.”

“Cassidy Lang.”

“I have her. I have the photo. She will be on the desk list tomorrow afternoon. If you come through after she is in, you will be walking on her. You will be able to look down and see everything in that drawing, except it will be her. I want you to know that before you hang up.”

“I will come through.”

“All right. Reply to the email with the name so the grant can post. Anything else?”

Adler’s voice came out even.

“No.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

They hung up.

Adler replied.

Cassidy Lang. Photo attached. I will send her after class tomorrow.

She sat with the two pictures side by side. Cassidy with the cup, turning to leave. The same body on its back, legs open, a stranger’s heel on the bar over her stomach, the plate shiny where it pressed her.

Adler’s breathing was shallow. She put her fingertips on the trackpad and held them on the plate in the drawing, then on Cassidy’s blouse in the photo. She took her hand away.

She wrote to Cassidy.

Go to the Concourse after class. Main security desk. Use my name. It is a paid opportunity.

She sent it.

Twelve thousand would post. Cassidy would read the message in the morning and think she had been chosen. Tomorrow Adler would look at her in class — the hair, the blouse, the long legs — and tell her to go downtown.

After that Adler would walk the concourse and look down through the bars at her student, naked in the floor, and step where the drawing said the plate would be.