

Chapter I — After the Quiet

The kettle lied about boiling. It ticked and breathed and tried to make itself sound urgent, but the water inside only stirred. Ace stood near enough to feel the heat through the safehouse counter and far enough to keep from fogging the window. The pane was a dull rectangle of night pressed flat, a very small version of a city trying not to be seen.

Jackets dripped on the backs of two chairs. The room smelled of wet nylon and old plaster. The power in the block was the cautious kind—enough to keep the refrigerator's light civilized, not enough to take bravado in the sockets. Every once in a while the ceiling fixture thought about humming and changed its mind.

"Your jaw," Mai said.

Ace unclenched and placed the tip of her tongue behind her front teeth to break the habit. "Calibration," she said.

Mai made a noncommittal sound that might have meant "okay" and might have meant "we both know what it means." Her silver hair was dragged back in a tie that had given up the fight hours ago. She had a disassembled tablet open on a folded towel and a grimoire leaf stenciled with ward-geometry pinned under glass. Her soldering iron rested in a nest made from a teacup she refused to admit was sentimental.

The iron's ready light held steady; the ward-lines breathed in a slow counter-rhythm. The two systems didn't agree about what was important. Mai coaxed a wire against a contact and the ward-sigil's little breath snagged and smoothed. She didn't smile. She didn't need to. It was a small clean thing inside a night that had too many edges.

"You hear it?" Ace asked.

Mai didn't look up. "No. You taste it."

Ace smirked because that was easier than nodding. "I taste it," she agreed. The tang had started as a flicker against her molars, the way cold metal shocked back through fillings even though she had none. It became a pressure under her left ear, then a little thread of green pulling tight under the ribs. Not alarm. Not yet. But the world had stepped a half-inch closer without asking permission.

Outside, streetlights ticked through a pattern that didn't belong to the weather. Hold, dim, breathe, back. Ten seconds between the breaths; thirty between the bigger ones. The kind of periodicity that pretended to be random unless you were waiting for it.

The kettle finished pretending and declared itself done. Ace poured water over tea that had been waiting since the last time they believed they might have time for tea. Mai didn't drink hers yet. She tilted the grimoire leaf so the ward's thin ink caught the overhead light, and for a heartbeat the lines between glyphs looked like streets. Then they were glyphs again, and it was only her hands that remembered the city.

"Violet?" Mai asked, finally glancing up.

"She's paying attention," Ace said. "Curious, not hungry."

Mai held her eyes a moment. "Good," she said, and turned back to the board.

The door knocked once without courtesy and opened before anyone could answer. Jack Bright came in like weather—coat slung in a shape that had known five different climates in five days, hair refusing the truce of combs, grin already set and then retracted like a joke that realized it had arrived early.

“My favorite field hazard,” he said. “And the person she married to make it respectable.”

Mai did not dignify that with a reply. She tapped her iron off and laid the tool flat. “Your comms were supposed to stay on.”

“They were,” Bright said. “And then someone thought an emp-proof stairwell would be funny.”

He shed his coat onto the third chair, reeled a little at the fact that the chair was already wet, and didn’t comment. He peered past Ace at the window and whistled under his breath at the streetlight’s breathless, too-regular pulse.

“You see it?” he asked.

“We taste it,” Ace said.

He didn’t ask for an explanation; he knew her enough to know she’d offer one if it would help. “Gears is on the wire,” Bright said, tapping his ear. “I told him I’d go see the two people who could tell the difference between coincidence and courting.”

“Flattering,” Mai said, and picked up her cup.

Bright’s ear clicked the way it always clicked when he checked his comms and remembered to pretend he didn’t live through the device as much as through his eyes. The click came back sharp enough for Ace to hear it without wanting to, and then a voice slid into the room that could have been printed and filed without changing tone.

“Signal verified,” Gears said. “Three zones. Pattern nonconforming. Handshake elements present and absent in alternating frames.”

“Poetry, please,” Bright said.

“Someone laid two decades of discontinued architectural muscle memory over a sanitation map and taught it to hum,” Gears said. “The hum should be inaudible. You are hearing it because you shouldn’t.”

Ace set her tea down untouched. “Horizon?”

Mai’s eyes cut to Ace’s and back to the board. She didn’t want the word said aloud yet. The room felt like it would hold its breath if asked.

“Elements,” Gears said. “If it were Horizon, it wouldn’t need to ask. It would knock, enter, and reorganize your cabinets.”

“The cabinets are already disorganized,” Bright said cheerfully.

“That is anthropomorphic,” Gears said, in the tone of a man refusing a pun on moral grounds. “Do not touch it. Do not answer it. Observe and report. Dr. Bright, if you bring them within a meter of an uncontained interface I will develop a new vocabulary of disappointment with your name on every page.”

The comm clicked dead before Bright could come up with something impish enough to spend on that.

Ace watched rain make slow scythes down the glass. The streetlight across from the safehouse held, dimmed, breathed, and came back up a shade off where it had been. The world shifted a degree. It was a thing you could deny if you had a day job that required it. Ace didn't.

"Observation it is," she said.

Mai drained half her cup, set it down like a decision, and held out her hand for Ace's wrist. Ace let her take it. Mai counted pulse points softly, not because she didn't know how many there were, but because counting them aloud made the momentum in the room change. "Stable," she said.

"Good," Bright said, trying to hide relief under levity and failing just enough to count. "Shall we go observe the part of town that thinks this weather is a suggestion?"

They pulled on the jackets that had not yet finished dripping. Ace zipped hers high and felt the familiar tug of scabbards settling into the cross of her back; the katanas' weight always recalculated the problem of gravity by a millimeter in her posture, which was enough to make the floor decide to keep her. Mai checked the disruptor's charge without theatrics. The runes along its grip took and reflected the ceiling light like they were auditioning for a new kind of math. Ace tried not to think about the way a phantom engine slept under her sternum and dreamed of maps.

The block around the safehouse had been a commercial strip once. There were still signs that insisted nothing had changed. A bakery that faintly remembered bread promised it would be open soon; an optician promised clarity; a locksmith promised an emergency service that did not, in any meaningful sense, continue to exist. The text stayed because no one had paid to take it down. The city let it stay the way a body lets scars stay.

Rain changed pitch against awnings and turned to spray at corners; the streetlight net breathed. The pattern repeated with a stubborn precision that did not flatter the maintenance budget. Bright led them down the block with the ease of someone who always believed a left would become a right if you treated it kindly. Ace tested the edge of her resonance on the air as one tests a knife on a thumbnail—gentle pressure, not enough to bite.

"See that junction?" Mai asked, angling her chin. A squat gray box at the base of a pole blinked a red that wasn't police and wasn't service. "Dead by the meter. Live by the rain."

Ace knelt and touched the metal with two fingers and then pulled back. Her fingers ghosted with galvanic sting. The box's blink didn't like skin. Mai crouched beside her, lifted the top with a key Bright should not have had, and let the device show its little theater: corroded contacts, an empty second slot, a curl of fiber that had no business being that clean.

"There's nothing in the slot," Mai said, and then: "There's something in the slot."

She didn't touch it. She put the tablet's antenna near the aperture and rolled through bands in a sequence she had developed for places like this, where wires remembered roommates they no longer had. The board purred to itself. An overlay threw numbers that meant distance and refusal. Somewhere inside the baked and damp box, the fiber shivered.

"Handshake," Ace said.

"It's like a hand on glass," Mai said. "It wants you to want to put your palm against it."

Bright made a face. "Is that the part where we remember Gears said no?"

Mai's mouth went neutral. "This is the part where we note that it pressed, and we didn't."

They walked three more blocks without the pattern changing and four more with it out of sync on purpose. Twice Ace tasted copper without bleeding and once she smelled hot plastic without the plastic. The rain settled into a rhythm that would have pleased someone who composed with metronomes. The city ran a breath line through its lower lights and waited to see what they would do.

Back at the safehouse, the room had glued itself back together the way rooms do when you step away. The kettle was off; the cups were empty; the window tried not to look like something that stared. Mai shook rain out of her sleeves and recalibrated the ward lattice over the grimoires' ropes and solder-scent. Ace stood by the wall with her palms flat, pressed in just enough to feel the plaster push back the way a person's sternum does if you rest your hand there and ask them to breathe.

"What does it feel like?" Mai asked, eyes on the board.

Ace had to decide whether to be clever or useful. She took a breath that counted as useful. "Like a ship that understands it is not a ship anymore," she said. "Like remembering the layout of a deck without needing to walk it. Like—"

She stopped. Violet had shifted, a minor reorientation inside the same locked room. Not a grab for the door; the turning of a head toward a sound. Curious. Not hungry. The distinction mattered.

"Like it found a line that used to be there," Ace finished. "And it would like to trace it."

Mai's hand found Ace's wrist again and pressed two fingers against the pulse. "Still stable," she said. "She's curious," she added, meaning Violet, and Ace nodded.

Bright watched with an expression that might have been called gentle if you didn't know how many ghosts were standing behind it. "I remember a time," he said lightly, "when you could walk into a room, turn on a light, and the light didn't ask if you were worthy."

"I remember a time," Mai said, "when you walked into rooms you had keys for."

He grinned and then let the grin fold. "Gears wasn't wrong," he said. "Horizon—if it is Horizon—wouldn't ask. It would use every forgotten conduit you left lying around and make itself home. But this?" He gestured toward the window, the junction box three blocks down, the patterns breathing in the municipal grid like lungs that had learned a new exercise. "This is something remembering how to knock."

The comm clicked back without being touched. Gears did not clear his throat. You could always tell when someone else did, which was why his not doing it became a kind of signature.

"Secondary spike," he said. "Two districts over. Different utility. Same cadence. We have an emerging preference profile—storm drains, old fiber, redundant copper. It rides what used to carry something and now carries nothing. I don't like poetry, but this is at least a half-rhyme."

"Someone buried a bone in the yard," Bright said. "Now it smells rain."

"Your analogies remain regrettable," Gears said. "New instruction. You will erect a barrier if you have to stay. Do not answer. Do not encourage. If it learns the shape of your response, it will seek more of it."

Mai straightened a little and set her shoulders like a mechanic preparing to lift a block with her hands and a prayer. "I can build a lattice," she said. "Ward geometry married to Faraday and ground loops. We make a threshold. If it knocks, it learns that it must stop at the door."

"Do that," Gears said. A beat that was not hesitation. "And...thank you."

The line went dead.

Bright's eyebrows tried to bounce and then thought better of it. "He does gratitude like a man taking a pill."

Mai was already moving—copper tape, wire, chalk for lines the tape could not convincingly draw, four little bells for the ritual's corners because sound had a way of convincing the world to behave. She taped a square that wasn't square to the floor and drew a circle that wasn't round inside it. The Faraday mesh around her board picked up an off-key hiss and then cleared its throat. She hammered one nail into a wall stud because the ritual demanded something to be more solid than it felt.

Ace stood beside the circle and let her own breath set the pace for the bells. She didn't hum. The resonance under her ribs would have followed. She watched Mai lay the last line and press it flat and knew the urge to say something comforting or clever was her own urge to try to make the room forgive the night for being what it was.

Mai met her eyes. "If it presses," she said, "we don't answer. We just let it know we're home."

"Home," Ace said, and the word did something correct in the room. She stepped back, not out, and felt the line of force the lattice made, a boundary that made the inside warmer by making the outside name itself.

The streetlight across the block held and dimmed and held again. The junction three blocks down performed its little red theater for no one. The comms stayed quiet. The bells at the circle's corners waited. The ward's ink lines lay like streets in a city map turned to an angle only cartographers care about.

Ace did not reach. That mattered. She let the curious shape inside her chest turn its head toward the door and left the door closed. Mai rested her palm against the meshwork frame the way you touch the flank of a nervous animal and feel it try to decide what you are.

It was not an influx. It was not dramatic. It was pressure in air and then a momentum asking whether the door was a door. The bells gave a single polite spat of sound and went still. The lattice accepted contact and did not permit entry. The temperature of the room shifted a fraction cooler, then back. The window decided not to fog.

Mai's board, which had been a board and a little priest, hummed twice. On the overlay that pretended to be an oscilloscope when it needed to, two teeth of a sawtooth wave rounded off and then resolved into a line that was not a line at all, but the suggestion of one. Not text. A shape. A route reduced to its most stubborn idea.

Ace felt the phantom engine under her sternum change the way a heartbeat changes when someone you trust touches your shoulder. Not faster. Not weaker. A vector checked itself, found it would be allowed to exist if it behaved, and did not push the door.

"Respect," Mai murmured.

Bright exhaled like a man finding out the trap would take one more step to spring. "That's new."

"It's learning," Mai said. "Or remembering that boundaries exist."

"Most of us need the refresher," Bright said, half to himself.

The pressure receded without drama. The room settled a millimeter into its studs. The bells were bells again. The board's overlay lost the route-shape and became ordinary data that no one trusted anyway. Ace removed her palm from the wall and rubbed the place where the plaster had pushed back against her sacrum and found she was smiling. Not a smirk. Something smaller and a little tired and a lot real.

"What do we tell Gears?" Bright asked.

"The truth," Mai said, still watching the mesh. "We made a door. It knocked. We did not open. It learned the word 'door.'"

Bright's face did that almost-smile he used when a thing he loved was also the thing that scared him. "He'll call that an unacceptable level of personification," he said. "Then he'll write it down."

Ace went to the window because she didn't want to be there when the mood changed and also because she wanted to be there. She watched the block breathe. The lights held, dimmed, came back—and this time the return was a fraction brighter, not in lumen, but in the way precision can be a light. The wave rolled down the street and took the corners like it knew the exact distance between each pole because it had measured that distance once as a different kind of current.

Mai's board blinked. Three characters slid across a part of the screen that wasn't set up for characters. They were not letters in any alphabet and still she understood them. They repeated once in a way that was not repetition.

Wake confirmed.

The overlay went blank. The bells didn't move. The lattice was only mesh and chalk and tape again. Outside, rain remembered how to be rain and fell without programming. Somewhere in the plumbing of the building, a pipe knocked in the way of old buildings.

Ace let her shoulders come down. Mai met her in the middle of the floor and put her fingers to Ace's wrist again. She counted without looking at the watch she never wore because she had never needed it. The count made a little metronome in the room, and the room admitted it.

"Stable," she said, and this time the word felt bigger than a vital sign.

Bright picked up his coat and didn't put it on. He stared at the door like it could decide to be a wall and then a door again. He put a coin on the counter he hadn't earned and didn't pick it back up. "All right," he said, voice smaller than his usual repertoire allowed. "We'll tell him. And we'll tell him we'll keep the door."

Mai nodded. "We'll keep the door."

Ace looked out at the street one more time. The lights breathed on schedule now, as if relieved to be told what to do by something that did not insist on owning them. The kettled lied softly about boiling again, trying to win back relevance.

"After the quiet," Ace said.

Mai tilted her head. "What?"

"It's when you hear the thing that's been there the whole time," Ace said. "After the quiet."

Mai's mouth did that double movement that meant she was adding something to a memory she would not write down. "We'll write that one between us," she said.

They stood together as the block exhaled and the room held. The rain offered them the old music. The boards remembered how to creak the way ships do, and Ace did not turn to chase the sound. She let it come to her and stop at the door and learn that a door was not an insult. It was a way to remain a home.

On the tablet, buried in a log no one had coded to display sentences, the three not-letters pulsed once more, as if satisfied that they had been understood.

Wake confirmed. —

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Last update: **27/03/2026 16:04**

