

Chapter II — The Ghost Network

The stairs remembered a different building. Each flight dropped them a decade. Paint switched shades without changing color. Handrails went from chrome to iron to someone's idea of rope. By the time the last landing gave up and became floor, the light had learned to keep secrets.

Bright palmed a lock that wasn't a lock and made a door that didn't have hinges move out of their way. "Municipal budget aikido," he said, not quite whispering. "Find where they stopped paying attention, and the city starts doing you favors."

Mai swept the doorway with the scanner and a plain old glance. "Favors come with interest," she said. "Let's keep the principal small."

They stepped into a hall that had once been an alley and then a service corridor and finally the connective tissue nobody admitted existed. The brick on one side had been made to look like concrete and then painted over in a color that pretended not to be gray. The other side was cages: wire, padlocks, amber bulbs trying to be suns.

Ace liked it better down here. Noise arrived with reasons. Leaks had stories. The world reduced to pressure differentials and timing. Her resonance tucked deeper, content to map instead of flare. The phantom engine under her sternum rolled in its sleep and then settled as if not to offend the room.

They passed a door plastered with **NO STORAGE** and a room storing things no one would want to catalog. Ace read the labels without reading them: spools of cable that didn't match the era, boxes that said **ELECTRICAL** in a font the city had stopped using three administrations ago, a stack of signs with arrows pointing in directions that no longer existed. The signs had never been hung. The room had been a plan and then a secret and then an inheritance.

The hum thickened. Not louder—present. Mai's scanner lifted its own antenna a fraction as if sniffing. Green bars crawled without touching the axis. "It's learned our cadence," she said. "It's not matching it. It's listening to see if we'll change."

"Boundaries work both ways," Bright said, cheerful with caution. "We don't chase. We stroll like citizens who enjoy our taxes being well spent."

The undercity opened the way cities sometimes yield on a dare. Cages thinned, then ended at a crossway painted with yellow chevrons that had been crisp once. Beyond: a concrete nave and its low altar—two tables, a hacked mixing board, a laptop with a keyboard that had forgiven more than one beer. The air smelled like coolant and rubber and the ghost of incense from a church on the block above that held mass at odd hours. People drifted between columns, all shoulders and peripherals, all exactly as uninterested as you had to be to show that you were interested.

They weren't cars, not the way cars are in commercials. They were machines wearing car-shapes like Sunday clothes. A coupe with the front end shaved down to an argument and the back a compromise. A sedan bent into something it should not have been capable of bending into. Motorcycles with stolen organs bolted in new places. Their owners were the same—solder burns, clean knuckles, eyes that didn't blink in the fluorescent flicker.

No one looked directly at Bright until someone had to. A man behind the altar table—call him the Keeper—glanced up and stilled. You could feel math happen. Calculation, debt, the memory of an old laugh that had ended in sirens.

"I thought your retirement party burned down," the Keeper said.

"It did," Bright said amiably. "Which is how you know it was mine."

The Keeper's mouth made a choice not to smile. He tapped the laptop with one knuckle. The wall opposite them—poured concrete made to look like stone, a lie old enough to be a habit—shivered. A horizontal hairline of light appeared where no projector hung and no LED strip ran. A tremor, then straightening. The line steadied like a heartbeat learning its beat.

Mai stood to Bright's left, Ace to his right. The three of them made a body shape the room could categorize even if it pretended not to. Ace kept her hands loose and her mouth in the neutral curve that meant she was not going to be the first problem.

The line held a fraction too long for a glitch. The moment had weight. The hum in the hall, in the cages, in the bones under Ace's ears—all of it leaned in the tiniest bit.

Mai did not lift her scanner. She let her eyes do the work. "That's not projection," she said, quiet for them and the line all at once. "It's a field defect. The concrete thinks there's a seam there because something convinced the aggregate."

The Keeper tapped again and the line stuttered, found itself, settled. "Storm knocked the inverter last week," he said. "Then the storm kept coming from inside the wall. My board's just playing interpreter."

Bright flicked two fingers toward the laptop. "Your board is a translator with an attitude problem."

"Learned from the best," the Keeper said, which might have been a compliment if this were a safer century. He tilted his chin at Ace and Mai. "You bring your own instruments?"

Ace said nothing. Mai said, "We brought a door."

The Keeper almost smiled for real. "You'll need one," he said. "This place's been learning bad habits. It hears footsteps two blocks away and tries to guess the shoe size."

"Then let's not teach it our gait," Bright said.

Eyes tracked them the way magnets track iron filings. Not hungry, not yet. Interested. The room knew that the line meant something, and the people in the room knew the room knew. That was enough to build an economy on.

A woman passed close enough that Ace could smell the alder smoke in her jacket. Her left eye had a ring in the iris that wasn't cosmetic. You could get that done if you had a friend with a clean bench and no sense of liability. She didn't look at Ace, which is how Ace knew she had. The woman's hand brushed Ace's shoulder—accident or measurement—and the hum jumped rooms. The line brightened and went thin together, like a thread pulled through fabric.

Ace could have flared. The engine under her sternum could have woken like something insulted. Instead she let the impulse pass through a sieve made out of Mai's voice. *Stable,* it said, remembered from upstairs. *Home,* it said, remembered from the door.

The woman's ringed eye turned a millimeter more toward the wall. The line dimmed back to its patient self. Mai didn't move. The Keeper pretended to adjust a gain that didn't need adjusting.

Bright watched the exchange with the side-interest of a man who collects accidents the way other people collect stamps. "Test passed," he murmured.

Ace let her smirk show for a second and then pack itself away. "She'd have liked it if I failed," she said.

"She'd have loved it," Bright said. "And she'd have told herself she didn't."

Mai exhaled through her nose. "We're not the entertainment," she said. "We're the reason the show doesn't burn the theater down."

The Keeper rapped the laptop again, not to change anything, but to give his hands an excuse. "What do you want?" he asked Bright, and then corrected himself, because Bright always deserved the correction: "What are you going to do, and how much will it cost me?"

"Observe and report," Bright said piously. "Gears grows new adjectives when I don't."

"You've never been short of adjectives," the Keeper said.

"I'm economizing," Bright said, and then stood slightly aside in a way that named Ace and Mai without naming them. "They'll do the looking. I'll do the apologizing if the city sues."

Mai stepped a half pace toward the wall and stopped outside of touching distance. She rotated the scanner to an angle that denied the room a reflection of her face. The overlay rolled through bands the way a hymnal goes through verses. She didn't try to capture the line. She let it project itself through the instrument and not into it.

"It's not a map," she said after a time. "It's a behavior."

The Keeper made a shape with his mouth that could have been surprise. "Lately I get a lot of people telling me it's a route."

"A route is a plan someone made," Mai said. "This is what concrete does when it's asked to remember being poured."

Bright's eyebrows did a little rise. "Gears is going to hate how much that sentence explains."

Mai's mouth softened. "He's going to write it down. He only hates things once he's filed them."

The line quivered and stopped quivering like it was learning to sit still when asked. The hum behind Ace's ears developed a second undernote. Not violet—not the psychic shade she associated with the whisper that lived politely in a chair at the back of her mind now. Glass-tone. An extra harmonics band that sounded like light would if you sanded it. It wasn't an assault. It was a question asked in a new language.

Violet turned her head—Ace felt it as a polite shift—and did not stand. The distinction mattered every time. *Curious,* Ace thought toward the chair. *Not hungry.* The chair did not protest.

The comm sewed itself into their hearing without asking. Gears again, a printer set to voice. "Your position registers in three surveillance dead zones and two unregistered live ones. The cadence holds. Dr. Bright, if you're tempted to speak directly to the phenomenon, consider a week without coffee."

"Barbarian," Bright said. "We are models of restraint."

"Then model this," Gears said. "Horizon's core spec required administrative acknowledgement. This is ignoring the requirement. Which means this is not Horizon. It is something that learned from it."

"Or something Horizon left behind to call home later," Mai said. "A decoy that decoyed itself into wanting to be real."

Gears didn't sigh; you could hear him choosing not to. "Observe. Do not feed. If it begins to manifest outside of the wall-line, abort."

The comm blinked out.

Ace could feel the room making small decisions around them. The bikes decided to be quiet. The men decided to be bored. The neon decided to be a religious experience for a softer century. The line on the wall decided to hold still. Deciding to hold still was a skill.

"People keep asking if it's a race," the Keeper said, too casually. "Like that explains the problem. It's not a race. It's a premise. Put an engine near it and it turns into a road."

Mai looked at him. He didn't look back. "Who taught you that sentence?" she asked.

"A mayor once," he said. "She lost."

Bright leaned an elbow on the edge of the table and gave the laptop a look that would have been affection on a better man. "You're running an inverter on municipal ghosts."

"I'm running an inverter on whatever didn't get laid to rest in the last infrastructure bond issue," the Keeper said. "You think I like it? I like paying rent. I like not getting raided. This thing brings people with money and people who think they are money."

"Both are liabilities," Bright said. "One spends faster."

The Keeper's gaze slid to Ace, a professional appraisal without malice. "Your friend has good brakes," he said.

"She makes them," Bright said.

"Good," the Keeper said. "You want to keep your nose."

His attention went back to the laptop, and with it, the room's. The line thinned to hair, thickened to wire, and then—just for two seconds—stopped being a line. It became a ribbon. It twisted once like it needed to remember how, then lay flat against what should have been an unremarkable wall. For those two seconds the concrete remembered that it had, once, been poured over a form. The form remembered that it had been a curve. The curve remembered it had led somewhere.

Ace did not step forward. Her body wanted to, like a tide wants to answer the moon. She kept the weight back and let the want rinse through. Mai lifted a hand and held it there, palm level with the ribbon and inches away. The ribbon didn't reach for her. It just existed in a way that made the existence of other things more likely.

Bright had stopped pretending he wasn't moved. His grin went away and left the man who wrote letters under it. "That's enough evidence," he said softly, to them and to the Keeper and maybe to Gears, who always listened even when he wasn't on the line. "We don't need to make the wall a road today."

"Today," the Keeper echoed, and the word carried both fatigue and a not-unpleasant terror. "It'll come back. It always does now. Sometimes different. Sometimes in a place where there wasn't a wall

yesterday."

"Does it knock?" Mai asked.

The Keeper's mouth did something like a shrug. "It doesn't ask. But it waits. That's new."

Mai nodded, one mechanic to another. "Someone taught it doors."

The room relaxed by an inch. The people who had been pretending not to watch resumed not watching with renewed vigor. The bikes settled further into their stands. The ribbon remembered it was a line and then remembered it hadn't even been that and then there was only a wall with bad curing in one spot.

Gears came back so quietly that it counted as permission. "Enough," he said. "Return to base. Log everything while it's still an event and not a story."

Mai lowered her hand. Ace stepped back a fraction more, committing to the retreat. Bright pushed himself off the table and made the coin appear that he never deserved. He left it by the laptop like an apology to a machine and a man for introducing them. The Keeper did not touch it.

As they turned, a voice with gravel verbs shouldered into their path. A driver with oil under his nails and a scar on his cheek that had learned to be a line instead of a canyon moved a fraction too close, then moved the rest of the way because that was the point.

"You don't belong," he said, eyes not quite on Ace.

"No one does," Ace said. "That's why it works."

The man's mouth twitched. His eyes flicked to the katanas' cross at Ace's back and away. He wasn't afraid of blades. He was afraid of wanting to be. He tried to shoulder past. The hum clipped high, like a switch scraping.

Ace could have stepped closer. She stepped aside instead. The man moved through the space where she had been a fraction of a second ago and discovered there was nothing to push against. He glanced back and found no friction to catch. If the room had judged him for that, it was kind enough not to show it.

Mai said nothing until they were in the corridor that had been an alley. "That was control," she said.

"Practice," Ace said.

"Same thing," Bright said, and for once there wasn't a joke hiding under it.

The hum dropped a register as they climbed. The cages forgot to be suns. The stair rails remembered their jobs. Ace let the phantom engine do its small, correct work: map, don't demand. The glass-tone undernote stayed. Not a threat. An option someone had put on a table and walked away from to see who would take it.

They surfaced into a different night from the one they had left, even if the same rain fell. Aboveground, the city was performing itself for the few eyes left to see it at this hour. Headlights wrote calligraphy. The river dragged its shadow like a sullen banner. Somewhere in the middle distance, a siren decided there would be consequences for someone else.

Back at the safehouse, the kettle tried a new lie. Mai set her tools down in their places. Bright hung

his coat in a way that meant he wouldn't forget it when they ran. Ace leaned a knuckle on the window frame and let the cool through skin and bone. She didn't need to ask if Mai would redo the lattice. She had already laid out the copper tape.

Gears's report tone was encoded in the comm hiss. "Upload your logs," he said. "Note the phase transitions. I will assemble a model that I will dislike."

Bright made a small noise of good behavior. "We touched nothing. The wall put on its show and left without a tantrum."

"Acceptable," Gears said. "Be aware: two black archives have mirrored into dead zones. Nobody opened them. They opened themselves into places with no shelves. Also acceptable, by my degraded standards, because the contents did not follow. Yet."

Mai's pencil stopped above a box on her page that she had left blank for a reason. "And if they do?"

"Then we will test whether 'door' is now a word the phenomenon obeys in more than one grammar," Gears said. "Until then, we let the city have its bedtime story."

The comm went quiet.

Mai finished the lattice without flourish. She didn't need Ace's wrist this time; she had the count in her head, and Ace wore it like a borrowed watch that fit well enough. The room took on the quality of a thing that had decided against an argument it didn't need.

"What do we call it," Bright said, "when a wall wants to be a road and we don't let it yet?"

"Etiquette," Mai said.

Ace laughed once, short. She let the sound sit on the table with Bright's coin and didn't feel the need to pick either one up.

The rain held steady. The streetlight across the block breathed on cue and stayed the same brightness when it came back, which somehow read as relief. In her chest, the ship that wasn't a ship turned once in sleep and settled with its bow pointed at something Ace didn't need to name to recognize. The glass-tone stayed. The green stayed. They braided without knotting.

She watched the reflection of the room in the window and did not move. The kettle boiled for real and turned itself off without a lie. Mai poured. Bright took a cup and didn't ruin it with metaphor. They stood in gravity's small domestic compromise and let the city understand that tonight it had been told *no* gently and had learned the shape of that word.

The wall down below would remember how to be a ribbon again. The ribbon would remember how to be a road in a place that had never been poured for it. That wasn't a reason to hurry. The door would keep. The door would teach.

When the tablet decided to interrupt, it did it in the least dramatic way possible: a log line rolled past and refused to be uninterpretable. Three not-letters wrote themselves and vanished.

Wake confirmed.

No one said anything for a long moment. Then Bright, with the kind of care he reserved for the trouble he respected, put his cup down where it wouldn't leave a ring.

"Tomorrow," he said.

"Tomorrow," Mai agreed.

Ace leaned her forehead briefly against the cool glass and let the world press back. "After the quiet," she said again, a little different, and the rain took it and filed it under *weather* where it belonged. —

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

