

Chapter 1 — The Dissonant Choir

The city had learned how to hold its breath.

On the good nights the harbor wind carried diesel and kelp across the concrete, and the high-rises hummed like patient machines. Tonight it carried a melody. Not music in the way buskers made music, not sirens or alarms, but a thin line of sound like a wire pulled tight between two teeth. It slid down alleys, climbed fire escapes, pressed under doors. Lights browned and flickered in time with it. Rats paused on thresholds, whiskers lifted, listening.

Ace stood on the lip of a rooftop billboard with her coat open to the dark. From this height the river looked like a blade laid across the district, and every lamp along the quay shivered with the same faint pulse. It beat through her boot soles. It nested behind her ribs. It had the exact spacing of candlewick crackle and reed pipe hiss, and her body knew it before her mind made a shape for it.

“Don’t like that,” Mai said behind her, voice low enough not to clang against the night. She had the hood up on her red jacket; the jacket was more stitching than fabric now, patched where acid rain had eaten it. “It’s not in a human scale.”

“It’s not in a scale at all,” Ace said. She curled gloved fingers over the edge of the sign and leaned her weight into the cold. The city’s skin prickled. “It’s a key.”

“To what?”

Ace let the question hang. It was the sort that made problems visible.

Below them, a tram slid along rails like a ghost. The windows were black, the driver slumped over the controls while the car cruised on momentum. The melody vibrated in the metal car, shimmering a halo around the pantograph. Across the tramyard fence a stray dog quailed, tail pinned to its belly, every hair along its spine erect. When the line of sound peaked, the dog lifted its muzzle and let out a long, toneless howl—not a fit, not fear exactly, but recognition.

Mai nudged Ace’s boot with her own, gentle. “You’re doing that thing,” she said. “The gaze.”

“What gaze?”

“The one you get when you smell ozone before anyone else does. It means we should go now.”

Ace angled her head, listening. The murmur inside her skull—the one she never named out loud—shifted with the city’s tone. Violet preferred laughter when things were about to go bad; now the voice shrugged silkily against the edges of her thoughts, amused.

There, little blade, Violet breathed. There’s the seam. Pluck it and it opens.

“I’m thinking,” Ace said.

“That’s what worries me.”

Ace smiled without showing it. The smirk was a habit other people saw; the smile, mostly Mai. She hopped down from the billboard, the drop a clean five meters into an iron nest of ladder rungs and scaffolding. The impact rang through her bones with the same faint pitch the city was playing. The katanas on her back crossed in a neat X, the lacquered sheaths catching a sliver of neon. When she moved, the runes along the sheaths twitched like something alive.

They descended the fire stairs together, boots hollow on the metal. In the alley, the hymn was louder, a breath on the tongue. It held church in it—the drag of robes over stone; it held factory—belts turning, teeth meshing. Ace could have sworn there was an old woman counting in the background, one-two-three-four-five in a language that smelled like tallow and chalk.

“Foundation said they were hearing ‘chanting,’” Mai murmured, tablet dim against her palm, its dull green light mapping spectra over the damp brick. “Nothing about full network resonance. Nothing about...the way it makes your eyes water.”

“Bright said a lot of things,” Ace answered. She let the name go like a coin into a gutter. She and Mai weren’t alone in that alley; they brought history with them wherever they stepped. “If he told us everything he knows, he’d have to admit he knew it.”

Mai’s mouth tightened. “You’re deflecting.”

“I’m compartmentalizing.”

“Same dictionary, different covers.”

They worked through the maze of back streets, the hymn guiding them the way a river guides debris, pulling with soft insistence. Ace relaxed her posture the way she did when she wanted to feel a room rather than walk through it. A pace into slow motion. Breath up the spine; shoulder blades soft; weight in the balls of her feet. The song laid diagrams across the street grid, invisible sigils that tugged more sharply when they aligned with old roadbeds and long-buried pipes.

They stopped at the mouth of a loading dock. A warehouse squatted across the street with its corrugated door shuddering, as though a giant had laid its palm against it from the inside and hummed. The air tasted of wet iron. In that taste: the memory of a day folded away in tissue paper, kept too long.

—candle wax dripping down fingers because the priest wouldn’t let the child put the taper down, not yet, steady now, look at me— —small toes chilled on stone. A ring of salt. Red chalk lines. A song made of counted breath. One-two-three-four-f—

Ace flinched and came back to herself hard enough that her teeth clicked.

“Ace?” Mai’s hand was on her elbow. It was always the same: present-tense reality anchored by pressure over the ulna, a firm circle, not possessive, not pleading. Just there. “You good?”

“I’m—” Ace looked past her, through her, felt the world like fabric between two fingers. Lying was a power save mode when things were dangerous; she didn’t waste it on the person who kept her steady. “I’ll be good.”

Mai didn’t look comforted, exactly, but she nodded like she was filing the answer under Worth Revisiting. She thumbed the runes on the disruptor’s slide; they lit one by one, chalk-white. The barrel hummed in a different register than the city’s tone, designed to cut across it like a blade against rope.

A ripple ran through the corrugation. Ace didn’t draw her swords yet. She stepped forward, pressed her palm against cool zinc, and leaned the bone of her wrist into it in a small, deliberate circle, feeling for a seam that wasn’t a seam. The hymn crested.

Something inside the warehouse answered.

It came slow on purpose, like a stage curtain rising. The corrugated door flexed outward. Lines unzipped through metal with the soft efficiency of paper tears. Brass screws rolled out onto the loading dock and sang where they touched the concrete. A hole dilated in the door.

They were not exactly people, the things that came out. The song had constructed them out of local materials, and the city had offered what it had: plaster dust, wet mortar, tar, the iron filings from a thousand cut pipes. The forms were bipedal because the song had learned that shape the same way a polite liar learns the shape of a smile. Their throats were open latticework like chapel screens, and in each screen a soft red light pulsed. When they opened their mouths there were no teeth, only five parallel dark lines like a staff drawn by a schoolchild. The sound came from the lines.

“Choir,” Mai said. Her voice hardly moved air.

“Bad choir,” Ace said.

The first of the choir-creatures stepped down into drizzle. Its head tilted. It listened to Ace listening. The pulse in its throat-screen quickened. It raised something like a hand and the wrist split in a clean line, opening to reveal a string of bells made of solder. They trembled and the city trembled with them.

Ace moved then, the way she always moved when a pretty shape got teeth. Not a lunge—that was for people who wanted to be inside a thing as fast as possible. She crossed laterally, loading one hip and then shifting her weight to the void where she’d been. The song faltered half a beat. She let one sheathed sword roll into her palm and used it like a lever, slipping the crossguard under the creature’s bell-wrist and torquing. The bells screamed in the key the city wanted. Green fire crawled up the lacquer like moss waking.

Mai was already up on a stack of pallets, disruptor braced in both hands, breathing slow. Her first shot stitched a neat white thread across three throats. Where the thread passed, the glow under the lattice guttered as if someone had closed a vent. The song dropped an octave. Windows up the block shuddered; one blew out in glitter and rain.

“Left,” Mai said, which was shorthand for the ninety things that followed: another one on your nine, watch the drip line overhead, there’s a spill and you will break your ankle if you turn too hard, I’ve got the high angle if you make them lift their faces. Ace didn’t say she’d heard. Her body spoke back in the way it always did with Mai: a slice that was almost a feint, then a genuine cut that used the rebound off the loading dock rail to change direction a second time without sacrificing speed. She didn’t open the swords fully yet. She used the sheaths like clubs, like weights on a tika pole. The runes along the lacquer blinked from silver to green-black and back in time with the hymn.

Two choir-things learned; they turned their staff-mouths towards her and sang a line that moved sideways. The note reached under Ace’s ribs and tried to pull her forward like a marionette. The city had taught that trick to people who built factories: how to make a conveyor out of the air. For a breath and a half she slid toward their open screens. The memory that had been waiting in the wings stepped onto the stage.

—sugar and salt in a bowl big enough to sit in, a woman’s palms dusted with both. “Count, Akira,” she said, patient. “We count because the pattern must not break.” The girl’s hair stuck to her face with sweat. Men in robes watched with their chins tucked into their collars. One-two-three—

Ace cut the memory with the turn of her head. The sword came clean out of one sheath with a sound that was half steel, half appetite. The green along the edge wasn’t a flame now; it was a breath condensed into dew, but it hissed where raindrops struck it. She slashed the air, not the creature,

splitting the note that had gone sideways. The song moved like fabric across the edge, threads parting. Mai stitched a second white line through throats the instant the harmony broke; three bodies fell apart as if they'd just remembered they were plaster and poured into the cracks they'd crawled out of.

The hole in the corrugation kept dilating.

"More," Mai said. Three at the word. Five. A dozen. Their red pulses synchronized with the tremor in the street lamps so perfectly that Ace began to wonder which had been conductor first—the city or the choir.

"Remember when we took a holiday," Mai said, calm as old tea, moving to keep her sightlines clean. "And by 'holiday' I mean the time we turned our phones off for four hours and sat by a canal and pretended to read."

"We can pretend again," Ace said. She stepped into a clean arc and let the sword bite through a lattice under its first bar. The thing didn't bleed; it un-sang. "After."

"After is good."

They fought without theatrics because theatrics are a kind of prayer, and the song would have eaten any prayer they gave it. Ace let her body do what it had been trained to do before she learned the names of the men who trained it—pattern, then break the pattern as soon as they expected it, then break the break. She pivoted off the toe, cut low across shin-equivalents, kicked into hips that tried to be hips, slammed the sheath into a jawline and heard the bells jangle wrong. Mai's fire stitched where Ace made openings, null fields bursting in small neat flowers across lattice and line.

"Three o'clock," Mai said.

"I see them."

"Your pupils are blown."

"I hear it too loud."

"I know," Mai said, and the admission made a little empty room in Ace's chest where another person might have put fear. "We finish here and we pull back. I want you on a building, not inside the note."

The city decided then to be helpful in the worst way. Storm drains began to sing.

It started with a single grate at the corner of the lot and cascaded with startling, idiot grace—water in pipes harmonizing with the creatures' throats. The tune found more metal to love: rebar, chain link, bicycle racks, a thousand cheap wind chimes hanging in a thousand kitchens. The choir grew teeth from distance alone.

Mai's disruptor coughed and threw a hot smell; she smacked the slide and changed out a cartridge the size of a fat marker. "Overheat," she said, and Ace heard the careful way she put the word down. Nothing like panic in it. Just the fact. "Thirty seconds."

"Take forty," Ace said, and opened herself a fraction.

It wasn't a technique she liked. It felt too much like making a promise to a liar. But there are lies that hinge doors.

She found the place in herself that the song had been leaning against—sternum, throat, palate—and unlatched it the way you unfasten a collar. The hymn rolled through the gap. It would have been agony if there had been pain in it; there was no pain, only obligation. It was the sound of being told what to do by an authority you didn't recall appointing. The air chilled on her tongue. The green along her blade brightened the way an ember brightens when someone breathes on it. Every hair along her arm stood up. She did not give it more than a fraction. She had learned her fractions the hard way.

There, Violet said, almost tender. Say hello to the first thing you ever loved.

"Don't push me," Ace said aloud. The choir paused, startled, if such faces could startle. For a heartbeat their staff-mouths pulled into the suggestion of a smile.

Mai's eyes snapped to Ace. She moved her hand in a sharp gesture that meant Stop showing off and another that meant I'm here, I'm here. The disruptor chirped done. She lifted, aimed, and the next white stitch wasn't a thread; it was a blank seam that erased a swath of sound entirely. The creatures it passed through collapsed into their component dust with the faintest sigh.

"You're getting better," Ace said.

"I work with what I have," Mai said. "What I have is a small god with knives who refuses to admit she's tired."

Ace snorted; the sound tasted like copper. She stepped backward, drawing the second sword. The X across her back became twin lines in her hands, and the alley's geometry made sense the way mazes make sense to rats who are born to them. She cut the last of the creatures close, intimate, and when the final throat-lattice gave up its glow the note the city had been holding dropped to a lower floor.

Silence after sustained noise is never silence. It is the echo of obligation.

The hole in the warehouse door hung open, a mouth mid-word. Beyond it: darkness that moved as if it were breathing. The hymn continued, lower, more interior now, as though it had decided to invite them inside.

Mai slid off the pallets and crossed to Ace. She holstered the disruptor as if it might bite. Her other hand went to Ace's jaw, thumb soft against the hinge. "You're pale," she said.

"I'm always pale."

"Don't be difficult. Look at me."

Ace looked. Their breaths fogged between them and fogged again as the temperature dropped a degree with the next phrase of the hymn. The city's lamps in their periphery were steady now; the storm drains hummed like a chorus under their feet. The quiet after fight always brought the after-image of motion—little shivers along muscle and tendon like things still flying that had already fallen. In that bright quiet Ace didn't have to pretend with Mai. It was easier to tell the truth while her heart still pounded with work.

"It knows me," Ace said.

Mai didn't blink. "How."

"It feels like—" Another flake of tissue paper fell away. The small girl's palms were slick with oil and salt; a voice counted because the counting kept the world in one piece. A hand to the back of a head,

pressing it toward a bowl that smelled like rust. "Like something I learned before I learned to say no."

"Then we don't go in there on its terms," Mai said. "We make it come out."

Ace let out a breath and made herself roll her shoulders, one then the other. Heat ghosted under the skin over her sternum. She looked down, startled.

Lines were rising there, faint as if drawn with a coal pulled from a dead fire. Not scars exactly, but the memory of scars—a circle and five bars inside it, like a staff inside a mouth. The city's air bit them and they gleamed and went dull.

Mai's thumb left Ace's jaw and went to the edge of one line. She didn't touch it, exactly; she hovered, a hair above skin. The look in her eyes was the one she wore when she found a new way to disassemble a lock. "You didn't have those an hour ago."

"No," Ace said.

"Any pain?"

"No. Just the knowing."

Mai's mouth hardened and then softened. "All right," she said. The decision settled like a coat pulled on. "I'll call it. If the Foundation wants to help, they can get their sensors off the truck and stop sending us voice notes that say 'interesting.' If Bright shows his face, I will personally tear out his pendant and make him explain what else he decided not to tell us."

"Promises," Ace said, which was a joke and also not.

Mai tapped her tablet awake and sent the packet—coordinates, spectral capture, a brief and uncharitable assessment. She switched to a local net and set three palm-sized devices on the loading dock. They woke with soft ticks and began to draw a circle Ace could feel against her skin. Not a ward exactly; more like a suggestion to the room physics that if reality needed a place to stand firm, it might choose this spot.

"I'm going to hate what's inside," Mai said. "Katedraali-level infrastructure if I had to guess, but buried. Or half-built and fed with people's refrigerators and storm drains as organs."

"Katedraali?"

Mai's mouth tugged sideways. "If you hum long enough into concrete, it learns the words."

Ace cocked her head. The internal murmur—Violet—had gone drowsy, like a cat pleased with its owner's eventual obedience. The hymn beyond the hole changed key; the change made the hair along Ace's arms rise a second time. This was lower, older. Not a choir's part, but the line a choir follows when it doesn't know it's following anything.

"There," she said, and to her own surprise the word came out reverent. "That's it. The first."

"The first what?" Mai asked, not unkind.

Ace listened with her bones. The notes traced the old scar in her mind. It was like opening a box and finding the note inside already addressed in her own hand. "The first voice," she said softly. The city pressed the words into the damp air. "Before all the others learned how to pretend to be it."

Mai stood very still. She did that when she was angry in a way that had nothing to do with volume. "How long," she asked, "have you been hearing that and not telling me?"

"I didn't have a name for it," Ace said. She wanted to make it neat, and she couldn't. "And when I don't have a name, it's easier to lie to myself."

Mai looked at the hole in the corrugation, and then back to Ace, and then down at the faint lines blooming on Ace's chest like pale, patient bruises. "We're not doing this alone," she said. "We're not doing this the way they made you do it—small, obedient, counted. If we touch it, we touch it together. Or not at all."

"Together," Ace said, because that word had always been the counterspell.

The first siren sounded at a distance then, not the city's, the Foundation's truck, shrill and idiotic and human. It bounced off glass and brick and came in wrong against the hymn. The wrongness pleased Ace. It meant something was still out of tune in the world, and as long as there was dissonance, a person could wedge a blade into it and pry.

"Back to the roof?" Mai asked. "I want eyes. And I want leverage."

"Roof," Ace agreed. She stepped back from the hole. The warehouse breathed, disappointed. The lines on her chest cooled, faded to the kind of marks you forget until you catch them in a mirror.

They moved. Up the ladders again, past the slick brick and the graffiti scrawls that looked like someone had tried to write the song down and given up. The air thinned in a way that made the stars look closer than they ever are in cities like this. On the billboard's lip, the wind lifted Ace's hair and threw rain at her throat. Far below, the Foundation van nosed into the alley, white with a logo that promised nothing except liability. Four figures piled out, shoulders hunched against weather and idea alike.

Mai leaned against the sign's metal frame and set her tablet to paint everything it could see. "We start with the drains," she said. "Break the spread. Then the fences. Then the door. You take anything that tries to write on your skin again and give it to me first."

"You and what gun," Ace said, and because the line wanted to be light, she let it.

Mai's mouth made a crooked shape. "This one," she said, and patted the holster. "And this one." She touched her chest, over her own sternum. Her palm stayed there, a still, warm weight. She held Ace's gaze for a count that would have made the old women spit and tie knots. "You come back to me every time."

"Every time," Ace said.

Below them the warehouse's mouth widened one notch, as if to laugh. The city's melody threaded itself into the siren's, patient as tide. The first voice went on singing, the sort of simple line that only sounds simple when you've forgotten there was a time before it.

Ace rolled her shoulders and the katanas settled against her spine like thoughts aligning. She felt very small and very exact. It was not a bad way to be, on a night like this, in a city that had learned to hold its breath.

"Let's make it breathe," she said, and the rain came down like the bar line turning the page. —

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