

## Chapter 2 — The Silent Vessel

The Foundation van's siren died mid-wail as if it realized, embarrassed, what kind of room it had just stumbled into. Down in the alley the doors banged open, boots hit water, gear cases clacked. From the roof Ace watched four shadows become people under sodium light: two techs already arguing in hand signals, a medic with a silvered case, and a man who wore a grin like a habit he could put on and take off as needed.

Bright tilted his face up as if he could feel being observed. The ruby pendant at his throat caught the alley lamp and threw it back red as a bruise. He didn't wave. He just stood there for a count, rain stippling his hair flat, and then he gestured toward the open mouth in the warehouse door with something like theatrical modesty.

Mai exhaled through her nose. "If he says 'You're welcome,' I'll shoot him in the foot."

"You'd miss," Ace said, because it made Mai snort, which moved her shoulders, which meant she would breathe deeper and think clearer.

They took the ladders down, boots squealing on wet steel, and the alley folded around them again with its damp and its patient hum. The small devices Mai had left on the dock were doing their work; the air around the door felt slightly heavier, the way a room feels when someone is paying attention in it.

"Ladies," Bright said, as if the word weighed nothing. "You brought the weather."

"It came when it heard the music," Mai said. She stepped so the medic would have to choose between bumping her or the wall and wasn't surprised when the medic took the wall. "What did you leave out of your briefing this time?"

His mouth ticked. The grin retracted a millimeter, not hurt, not offense—an adjustment, like tapping a barometer. "I prefer to disclose in the order that prevents panic among stakeholders."

"How thoughtful," Mai said. "Let's try a new order: all of it, now."

Ace let them take each other's measure. She moved to the door, staying inside the circle of devices. The hymn had drawn itself back from the opening in modesty or malice; either way it breathed quieter, like a sleeper not quite asleep. The lines on her sternum had cooled to a faint map. She slid two fingers under the edge of her shirt and pressed. No pain; only the sense of a word you could almost remember.

"Dr. Vasiliev," Bright called over his shoulder. "Rig the piezos and the ground mics—yes, hello, welcome to the worst choir practice you've ever attended. No, do not put anything directly on the threshold. You've seen teeth; you should trust that there are more."

The tall tech—Vasiliev—nodded through a rain of cable and began to staple sensors to the dock face with musician's economy. The other tech produced a tablet larger than Mai's and a spool of limp antenna that made the air hiss where it unrolled.

"Miss Mai," Bright added, turning back with the grin reinstalled. "I find I am kinder when I am allowed to keep my jewelry. Which is to say, please don't tear out my pendant today."

"Then don't make me want to," Mai said, but the edge in her voice dulled a degree.

The medic ghosted close to Ace. "Vitals?"

"Save your stethoscope," Ace said. "I'll tell you if I fall over."

"Humor me," the medic said. She had the tired eyes of people who put other people back together with wire and hope. Ace held out her wrist without rolling her eyes, watched the numbers blink on a screen: elevated, steady, wrong in the way the city was wrong.

The ground mics came alive one by one. Their traces crawled across Vasiliev's monitor in pale green earthworms that reared when the drains sang. A spectrogram bloomed—blotches moving like weather maps in colors the tablet translated to human.

Mai drifted toward the techs, the way she always did around machines. She didn't touch anything. She didn't need to. "Show me the base layer," she said softly. "Strip out the street noise, the siren bounce."

Vasiliev hesitated, then flicked two fingers. The upper bands dimmed. What remained looked like a child's finger painting: a fat low smear with very clean edges.

"That's not ground-roll," Mai said. "That's intentional."

"Everything about this is intentional," Bright said. "Which is why we asked two professionals rather than throwing a dozen boys with hammers at it."

Mai didn't look at him. "What is it phrasing against?"

Vasiliev glanced at Bright. Bright spread his hands like a dealer who doesn't mind showing the deck. "We've got a working hypothesis," he said. "One we didn't share over the phone because the last time I used the word we're about to use, an entire site lost power for three minutes."

"Try me," Mai said.

Bright looked at Ace. It wasn't deference. It was a small courtesy, and Bright was very good at those. "You already told her," he said. "Didn't you."

"I told her a name," Ace said. She didn't look at the medic's numbers. She watched the door. "Not a meaning."

"Names are heavier than meanings," Bright said lightly, and the medic's mouth twitched as if she wanted to argue the theology and didn't. He tucked his hands into his coat pockets and rocked on his heels. His hair had gone from rain-flattened to rain-matted. The ruby lay like a clot on his throat. "We've seen this signature three times in the last decade," he said. "Not here. Not like this. Small. Controlled. In rooms older than anyone wants to admit are still standing. We call it the First Voice not because we think it's a person's voice, but because every other resonance we track seems to be trying to be it when it grows up."

Vasiliev zoomed. The smear resolved into something more granular: repeating spines, equidistant; plateaus at odd intervals. Mai leaned in. "It's counted."

"Everything counted," Bright agreed, his tone very mild now. "One-two-three-four-five. The way a nursery nurse counts breath. The way a cultist counts steps between knots."

Ace's hand, against her own ribcage, curled.

"Here's the part that will make you angry," Bright said, and it was almost tender, the warning. "The count recognizes you."

The alley lost a little of its air. The rain seemed to remember it had somewhere else to be.

Mai turned from the screen. Her face didn't heat; it cooled, the way a red-hot bar goes black when it's taken from the forge and set in snow. "Explain," she said.

"Resonance locks onto shape," Bright said. "It likes instruments. Organs. Pipes and grates. Bones. It loves bones. In certain configurations—" He held up both hands before Mai could speak. "Configurations created by terrible people for terrible reasons—resonance will look for a particular bone-cage to play. We have files," he added softly. "You will hate them."

"What configurations," Mai said. The words were stone.

"Children," Bright said, and in that moment the grin finally quit. He stood very still in the rain. The ruby caught a drop and wore it like a tear. "Thin chests, flexible cartilage, sutures not yet sealed. You can make a bell out of anything if you refuse to call it a bell."

Violet poured laughter through Ace's head, cold as river water. She tasted wax and ash and coins bitten to test their truth. In the voice under the laughter: a different thing. Not kindness. Not cruelty. The matter-of-factness of instruction.

Hold your breath, little blade. Count, and the world will oblige.

The medic's hand hovered, then withdrew. Mai's eyes went from the pendant to Bright's mouth to the space in front of Ace as if she were seeing something written there. "Say the term," she said, very quiet now.

Bright breathed rain. "Silent Vessel," he said. He did not ornament it. He didn't pad it. He put it down between them like an object from a museum cabinet.

"You knew," Mai said. Not a question. The sentence was a blade laid on a table.

"I knew the term," Bright said. "I knew the measurements that fit the term. I knew that when a certain range of bone lengths and volumes stands in a certain room, the room behaves as if someone had lit a candle."

"And you brought her anyway," Mai said.

"I called her because she walks into rooms like that and comes out again," Bright said. "You did, too. Don't make this into a solo act."

Mai took one step forward. Bright did not back up. Vasiliev and the medic didn't breathe, or their breath didn't count.

"The first time I saw her," Mai said, "she was bleeding and still moving like gravity was a preference. You people looked at that and wrote down numbers." Her hand lifted and dropped. "You will give me the files," she said. Not a plea. A scheduling note. "You will tell me where you got the term. You will tell me how many times you tested children to make the math that gives you your clever, clever graphs."

Bright's gaze flicked to Ace for a fraction of a second. Mai saw it. She marked that, too. Then he

nodded once, as if offering an oath he hated. "You will have the files," he said. "You will not enjoy what happens to you after you read them."

Mai's mouth made a silent shape that might have been I already don't.

Ace turned away from the door at last. She could feel the hymn press and recede with their conversation, nosy and patient. "Say it plain," she said to Bright. "What do you think I am."

"A tuning fork," Bright said. Relief flickered—she'd asked the question and now he could answer and move the world back into the sort of place where he knew which words to spend. "A resonator built on scar and intention. The Order wanted an instrument. They broke a town to make one. They made you."

"They didn't finish," Ace said.

"The delightful consequence of you being contrary," Bright said, and there was that shine again, the salesman who likes being right. "But instruments don't forget their first songs. They keep the imprint. The First Voice is bouncing off you because you were carved to give it a clean wall to echo on."

Mai's hand found Ace's. Not a rescue. A bridge built in a storm so they could both stand on the same side of the river. Ace closed around it. Her knuckles felt wrong; too many places in her wanted to go quiet and let the old counting start.

"I am not a wall," Ace said. Calm. That was new. She would examine that later. "I am a person who kills things that mistake me for furniture."

"On that we agree," Bright said.

The warehouse breathed again. The hymn dipped, then rose in a ribbon that laid itself over the spectrogram like a second handwriting. Vasiliev made a small involuntary sound.

"What," Mai said without looking.

"It...responded," Vasiliev said. His English was bright with Moscow. "When you said the word. Vessel. The low band—see? It gave harmonic."

Ace didn't look at the screen. She watched the dark beyond the hole, the way you watch a place where you used to live after someone else moves in. "It likes being named," she said softly. "Most things do."

"Then don't feed it," Mai said.

Bright rapped his knuckles against the van's side panel, decision made. "We are not going in there on its terms," he said, echoing Mai verbatim without having heard her on the roof. "We pull the spokes out of the wheel. Drains. Fences. Anything humming becomes something that is not humming. Kosta, get me the EM bricks. Vasiliev, I want eight accelerometers on the street in an L to the storm line. If it has a cathedral, we're going to make it sing off-key until it spits."

The alley flickered, a polite cough from the power grid. Somewhere two blocks away a transformer grumbled and failed. The light above them stuttered and found itself again.

"Timeline," Mai said, professional now, fury banked beneath the layer that did logistics.

"Thirty for first ring," Bright said. "Sixty for the drains if the city map lies to us, which it will."

"Then we start now," Mai said, and she was already moving. "Ace, I want you up and down, mobile. If it pushes lines across your skin again, you give me the count. Out loud. I don't care how it tastes. If you feel yourself going under—"

"I say your name," Ace said. "I know the steps."

Mai's mouth tugged minutely. It wasn't a smile. It was a notch carved in something hard so you could fit your fingers and pull. "Good."

They got to work.

Kosta—the medic with the tired eyes—turns out not to be merely a medic. She had a duffel of what looked like paving stones and behaved like honest miracles: rough black bricks that sweated a field you could taste. Mai set them at the corners of the loading dock like chess pieces, then along the fence line where the chain links jangled with song. The humming in the metal fell by half and then by half again until the fence became a fence and not a harp. Each time, the spectrogram lost a stripe. Each time, the note inside Ace's ribcage rearranged itself like an animal searching for a new place to sleep.

Vasiliev and Bright fed accelerometers into drill holes in the asphalt, their cables writhing like damp antennae. A second tablet appeared and began building a map in pale veins: where the hymn walked under the street; where it climbed into poles; where it tasted manhole rims and decided it liked them.

Ace did laps. She ran the perimeter, moved across rooftops, vanished and reappeared with the sensible disregard for human geometry she'd taught her body to have. Whenever she felt the prickle start along her sternum, she touched her throat and said, audibly, "Mai."

It had the effect of a stake tapped into earth. The lines dimmed. The taste of wax and chalk receded six steps.

"Count," Mai called once, and Ace obeyed before she thought to resist.

"One-two-three-four-five," she said, and the warehouse made a small sound like a laugh.

The laugh stiffened her spine. She pivoted on a drainpipe, landed light, and looked back. She did not like being amused at.

"Get used to it," Violet breathed, lazy. "We love you when you're difficult."

"Get out of my mouth," Ace said, and the word fogged the night.

She found the weak points the way she always did—with her feet, with her teeth, with the simple algorithm of break what listens most. A cluster of restaurant vents three doors down had learned to sing; she climbed their rungs like odd ladders and struck them, two knuckles at each, until their rattles fell out of key. A run of copper gutters had become a staff written along a block of old rowhouses; she took a sword and split a bracket without cutting the gutter, so the water moved differently. Even small changes shivered the spectrogram in small ways. Cumulative. Erosion as strategy.

Bright directed traffic with the grace of a conductor who loved his orchestra even when it was surly. He didn't get in Mai's way. He didn't touch Ace. He didn't say Silent Vessel again. He didn't have to. The word had climbed up on a beam and sat there like a crow, watching.

At fifty-two minutes, the alley's sound changed. Not much. Enough. The hymn dipped to taste its own teeth and found one missing.

Mai didn't grin, but she let her eyebrows lift. "Again," she said, and pointed Vasiliev at the storm line. He scuttled with accelerometers like a crab with eggs.

The warehouse reacted.

No shape came through the door. The air pressed outward instead, a soft bellows. The line on the spectrogram that had been so clean began to ripple, and where it rippled it climbed, and where it climbed it reached for the registers where human hearing becomes headache.

Mai's hand flicked in warning and Ace dropped from the roof a beat before the push hit the dock. The first wave wasn't sound, exactly; it was insistence. The devices Mai had set down ticked like cicadas. The bricks sweated harder. The fence's last hums guttered and went dark.

Kosta swore once, softly. "Nosebleeds in five," she said, passing gauze like party favors.

Bright spat pink into the rain and dabbed at his upper lip with the back of his hand. "Flirt," he told the door. "I already have plans."

Ace stepped to the line she wasn't supposed to cross and did not cross it. The mark on her chest pricked like a warning. She lifted one sword and laid its flat against the air, like a ruler across a misbehaving student's knuckles. The push hit the blade and slid. It tried to find a place inside her mouth. She did not open.

"Mai," she said.

"Here."

"Count with me."

They did. Not the cult count. Not the nursery. The way they counted when running stairs after nights that left smoke in their hair—two floors each and switch, one-two-three-four, breath on the landing, five-six-seven-eight—

They didn't make it pretty. They made it theirs. The spectrogram blurred and then steadied; the ripple found a rhythm it didn't like and settled. The pressure backed off a fraction.

"I hate it when you're right," Bright told the night, and threw Vasiliev a cable without looking.

Mai didn't look away from Ace. "You feel okay."

"I feel located," Ace said, and the corner of Mai's mouth moved again.

They worked another twenty minutes, shredding spread, stealing small instruments from the cathedral they couldn't yet see. By the time the drains had been made stubborn and the fences had remembered their jobs and the vents had quit their humming, the alley had a new sound: the honest small sounds of a city that is not consenting to a ritual. Water. Wind. The tremor in a transformer that was annoyed but intact.

The warehouse door stayed open. The dark behind it breathed, but it no longer set the streetlamps blinking. The first voice went on, more interior now, like someone humming with their lips closed.

Mai squinted at the map on her tablet and drew a shape on it with her finger. "It's not centered here," she said, thoughtful and grimly pleased to have something to point at. "This is just a mouth. The lungs are under us and over two blocks, then angling toward the river."

"Cathedral," Bright murmured. No triumph in it. Only acknowledgement. "If you hum into concrete long enough," he added, glancing at Mai, "it learns the words."

"I'm very quotable," Mai said dryly. Then, to Ace, softer: "How's the writing?"

Ace touched her sternum. The lines were there. Faint. Waiting. "It wants me to remember faster than I want."

"Then we set the pace," Mai said. "We go home. We sleep. We come back with the map and better shoes."

"I have good shoes," Ace said.

"You have loud shoes. I'll fix the soles."

Bright's eyes did the quick bright thing: calculation against affection he didn't understand. "We're not leaving a door open in a neighborhood where teenagers think dares are a food group," he said. "We seal the opening. We leave monitors. We ask the city to mind the teeth we dulled."

"You can ask," Mai said. "I'll build."

They did both. Kosta taped gauze to noses and wrote numbers. Vasiliev left an array that would tattletale if the hymn surged. Bright called a truck that had, coincidentally, been staged three blocks away. Mai built a hinge out of three bricks and a prayer that wasn't a prayer, and when they set the corrugated sheet back into its slot it stayed, sulking.

The rain eased to a polite mist. Somewhere a dog decided the night had gone back to being about dogs and not about angels and lay down.

Bright stood with his hands jammed into his coat pockets and looked, for one second, his true age, which was not what his face said. "I'll send the files," he said to Mai, and because he was not entirely a coward he said, "I am sorry."

"You can put that at the end of the email," Mai said, not cruel. Tired. "Subject line: Everything You Should Have Said Yesterday."

"Noted." He touched the ruby with one finger and then seemed to remember he'd done it in public and let his hand fall. He looked at Ace and did not look at her chest. "And you," he said. "If you need to break expensive things before we go where this leads, call me. It's good for the budget to be right about some line items."

Ace tilted her head. "I'll smash your pendant," she said, almost kindly, and Bright laughed, actually laughed, like a man who had just walked past a falling piano.

When the van finally pulled away, its siren dead, its tires making small soft sounds on wet road, the alley let out the breath it had been holding for an hour. The city found its old key. Not perfect. Good enough.

They climbed back to the roof with the kind of slowness that isn't fatigue, exactly, but an agreement

with the body that you won't ask more of it this minute. The billboard wind was cleaner now. The river's blade lay in its sheath again.

Mai sat with her back to the sign's frame and tugged Ace down beside her by the laces on her sleeve. For a while they let the kind of silence that isn't silence do the work: the soft thrum of distant train, the hiss of rain on neon, breath syncing because that's what it always does after you've counted together.

"Say it," Mai said eventually, not looking at her. "Say what it felt like when he said the words."

Ace rolled that thin, mean grace of honesty over in her mouth and let it cut her once before she gave it away. "It felt like somebody opened a drawer I'd nailed shut," she said. "And everything inside was labeled in a hand that looks like mine."

Mai's hand found hers again and made the bridge. "We'll relabel it," she said. "With my handwriting. Ugly as sin."

"It's very ugly," Ace agreed, grateful for the small cruelty in the humor. It let her swallow. "You're not going to sleep tonight."

"No," Mai said. "You're going to sleep. I'm going to read files and make a map and hate a monastery you never asked to visit."

"Bring me the names," Ace said quietly. "Of the rooms. Of the men. Of the women who counted. I don't want to walk through them nameless."

"You'll have them," Mai said. She flexed her fingers once, as though somewhere far below the city had tried to hold her hand and she'd shaken it off. "And Ace?"

"Mm."

"When we go into the lungs," Mai said, "and we will, because inevitably, I will be with you because I have a very poor sense of self-preservation where you're concerned—if it writes on you again, and if your mouth wants to sing, I will cover it with my hand and you will bite me before you sing. Understood?"

Ace thought, briefly, of the little girl and the bowl and the one-two-three. She thought of Mai's palm like a warm, stubborn brick against her skin. She thought of the word together, the only counterspell that had ever worked twice. "Understood," she said.

"Good." Mai's shoulder touched hers, light as punctuation. "Let's go home."

They stood. The city watched them go and made the streetlights behave themselves. The river lay quiet. The warehouse was only a warehouse again with a door that had forgotten how to be a mouth.

For now.

Behind corrugation and concrete, in the deep rooms that had been taught to sing, the first voice went on humming to itself, perfectly patient, the way foundations hum when they think you're not listening.

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