

## Chapter 3 — Fractured Memory

They didn't go far. Bright's van took the long road to whatever temporary sanctum he'd arranged; Ace and Mai cut three blocks east and two south to a walk-up that looked like an argument between brick and ivy. The stairwell smelled of old paper and rain. Their door stuck the way it always stuck and then gave, the deadbolt thumping back like a heart deciding to keep working.

Inside was the kind of order you get from two people who can find a gauze roll by feel and don't mind eating on the floor. The table had three gouges along one edge from a night Ace didn't discuss. The kettle had a dent from a morning Mai did. There were maps rolled under string, a line of screws standing up to dry after some repair neither of them had time to finish. The window let the river's breath in without letting the rain.

Mai hung her jacket on the chair back and set Bright's files down like weapons. She didn't turn on the overhead. She made the room only as bright as it needed to be to read without squinting. "Shower," she said, already untying the string. "Warm. Ten minutes."

Ace reached to catch the words and tuck them under her tongue. They left a taste like copper pennies, like discipline. She went to the bathroom and let water drum her shoulders until her skin remembered itself. In the mirror the faint bars on her sternum had the patience of old ink, pale and certain. When she came out, hair slicked back and shirt changed, Mai had made tea she wouldn't drink until it was cold. She had also stopped speaking out loud. The words were going into her eyes and hands instead.

"Tell me when you need me to stop," Mai said, without looking up. That meant she'd already hit something sharp.

"Don't stop," Ace said. She lay down on the sofa with her spine in the rut her body had made over months and put one arm over her eyes. "Just...say my name if I drift."

"Always."

Page after page, the paper made a hush that wasn't silence. Outside, the city checked its pulse and found it regular. A siren far off had the good sense to keep its voice down.

Ace let the sofa hold her. She folded her breath in halves and then in halves again until it fit the room. Sleep didn't descend; it accumulated, a drift that only felt like falling once it was too deep to climb out.

She was standing on stone. That was the first thing—the chill that climbs through little bones when the floor is honest. She was small enough that the robe dragged, soaking up oil. There was a bowl big as a basin and it held two things that do not belong together: salt and something that moved like light on water.

"Count, Akira," a woman said, kindly. Always kindly. "Count or the pattern breaks."

"One," the child said, hand hovering over the bowl, palm slick. "Two."

The room was wrong. Not because of blood—that would have been ordinary. The wrongness was in the corners, where someone had convinced the angles to lean closer. Men watched with their chins tucked down, and the old woman with the cracked fingernails stood just behind the child's shoulder making a sound like breath through teeth.

“Three,” the child said. The bowl caught the light and folded it. A priest drew five straight bars inside a circle on the stone with red chalk that smudged, and when he finished, he drew them again, harder. “Four.”

Her mother’s hands were steady when she tied the braid. Her father had the set mouth of a man who believes a math problem can love him if he solves it cleanly.

“Five,” the child said.

The men hummed the note between notes. The old woman stopped counting and nodded once, satisfied. Hands lifted the child and placed her within the chalk—no drama. Everyone knew their parts. The bowl came up under her face, so close the salt burned her nose. “Hold,” someone said. The word was a bridge no one else could see.

Ace woke with her teeth in her lip. The room was dimmer by perhaps an inch of sky. Mai had swapped stacks; the file now open had onion-skin pages flensed from older books. She had a pencil behind her ear and a vein showing at her temple that meant she was holding very still to stop herself from breaking the paper.

“You said my name,” Ace murmured, and flexed her jaw. Her lip gave, warm and clean.

“You were counting backwards,” Mai said, gaze finally on her. “In Korean.”

“I don’t know how,” Ace said.

“You do now,” Mai said, and the kind tone in her voice wasn’t for Ace, not exactly. It was for the small animal under the sofa cushion that liked to run when things got loud.

Mai tapped one page with one fingernail. “Ledger. Not Foundation—Order. Transcribed by a man with neat handwriting who wrote notes to himself in the margins and thought they made him moral.” She didn’t spit; the word did it for her. “Hymnal numbers. Children’s names replaced with sigils, but the birth measurements are here. Chest circumference in millimeters. Suture lengths. Breath-hold times to five-count under oil and salt. I wanted him to have the decency to shake.”

“He didn’t,” Ace said. It wasn’t a question.

“He underlined,” Mai said.

Ace sat up slowly. “Say the symbol.”

Mai drew in the air without touching: circle, five bars. “They call it the Staff Sign,” she said. “He writes ‘staff’ and then corrects it to ‘stave’ in the margin and then corrects that to ‘bar’ and then goes back to ‘staff’ because he likes how it sounds like church. There are side notes about resonance response in ‘vessels’—girls five to eight with thin sternums and calm dispositions preferred. You were calm?”

“No,” Ace said. “I was obedient where eyes could see. It amounts.”

Mai’s mouth made that hard-soft shape again. She turned a page and swore under her breath, a word like a struck match. “Monastery,” she said. “Under the town. A ‘choir room’ with ‘staves inlaid’ and ‘stone organs.’ They used the river, of course they used the river. Did your father take you there?”

Ace saw hands. Not the men’s; her father’s. He washed the bowl with salt after every session because that was how his little order kept the idea of purity intact. He did it slowly, thinking about something

he wouldn't say out loud. He had a scar on his thumb where a wire had snapped. He wore it like anyone wears a truth that doesn't belong to them.

"He did," Ace said. "He didn't look at me while I stood in the circle. He looked at the lines."

"And your mother?"

"Held my braid so it wouldn't drag," Ace said. "Wrote the wards like they were making her late." She closed her eyes. "She sang afterwards, when we walked home. Always old songs, and never finished. Someone told her once that finishing a song makes it stuck. She liked things that could still change."

Mai let the pencil go from behind her ear and set it down as if it might break. "They made you into a room and told themselves it was music," she said. "They called it salvation. They told each other stories about walls that keep harm out, not harm in. They wrote that word—'salvation'—twelve times in one page."

Ace breathed in. There, little blade, Violet murmured, sweet as vinegar. They loved you the way you can love a knife.

"Say more," Ace said to Mai. "Say the ugly parts."

"They ran breath discipline until the fifth count and then demanded stillness while they hummed. Girls who cried were marked 'noisy' and reassigned. Boys used as control bodies. The old woman? Ledger calls her Choir-Mother. She 'took the count' in three languages." Mai's voice thinned. "There are notes about the 'pleasant side-effect' of fewer runaway children during 'program months.' I would like to set his ledger on fire, and then feed him a mouthful of the ash."

"Later," Ace said. "We keep the paper until it hurts someone who deserves it."

Mai's laugh held no joy and no cruelty. "You and your ethics," she said. Then, gentler: "You're shaking."

"I'm remembering faster than I want," Ace said. Then, because they had an agreement about speed, she told the rest before it could set: "There was a door. Not a door," she corrected herself, slow. "A hole someone convinced to behave like one. They called it the mouth. They were—proud of the metaphor."

Mai's hand found Ace's thigh, pressing over denim, weight and warmth. "What did they feed it?"

"Breath," Ace said. "Patterns. Counting. Whatever truth clings to a child who believes her parents know what a door is for." She touched the faint bars on her chest, and found them warmer under her fingers now. "I think the warehouse is above that choir room."

Mai turned the map she'd been building with her pencil and hands and set it next to Ace's palm. Lines blued in graphite; arrows; a block shaded by rubbing. "The drains, the fence, the way the note climbed at the corner on Tench and Row," she said. "It all leans toward a hollow under the old customs house." She tapped the rectangle. "That."

"Cathedral lungs," Ace said. "They're older than the warehouse. The door was new. Mouth on an old animal."

Mai watched her watch the map. "Your mother," she said. "Was she Order by conviction or by circumstance?"

Ace tasted candle smoke and a lullaby cut off in the third bar. “Both,” she said. “She liked things that worked, even if they were ugly when you turned them over. She hated waste. She hated begging. She hated men who pretended to be saints. She married one and made him better and then helped him build a room that made her sick to look at.”

“You loved her,” Mai said.

“I loved the parts of her that were mine,” Ace said. “I hated the parts she gave to the Order. I think she did, too, when no one was counting.”

Mai’s thumb traced a small circle through the fabric on Ace’s leg. “Your father?”

“He loved the pattern because it promised that his fear could be sorted into piles,” Ace said. “He loved me because I fit the pattern.” She closed her eyes once, brief and clean. “He tried to teach me the difference between calling a thing music and calling it harm. He failed.”

Mai put the pencil away. “I’m going to draw on you now,” she said.

Ace blinked. “You’re what.”

“I’m going to write over their shape,” Mai said, voice a notch steadier, because when she had a task all the rooms in her lined up. “You said you didn’t want to walk through this nameless. Until we set foot under that customs house, you don’t wear their bars by themselves.”

Ace considered the part of her that wanted to say: don’t bother me. She considered the part of her that had bitten her lip in her sleep and counted in a language she’d never learned. “Do it,” she said.

Mai fetched chalk from a dish on the shelf—a stub as ugly as she’d promised. She sat on the edge of the sofa, knees to the cushion, and pushed Ace’s shirt up to the notch at her throat. The room had gone very quiet. Rain had decided to be considerate elsewhere. Ace leaned back and let the old marks breathe the cool air.

Mai’s hand was warm. She didn’t trace the bars. She ignored them the way you ignore a stain until the laundry cycle that gets it out. She drew a square. Then a crooked line through it. Then a little X that wasn’t a cross.

“What is that,” Ace said, amused despite the tightness in her chest.

“Ugly handwriting,” Mai said. “You said it last chapter. My counterspell. It means ‘this space is claimed by someone who counts differently.’”

“Will it work,” Ace asked.

“I’ll make it,” Mai said. “If it tries to write over my line, it will have to go through me. No one has enjoyed doing that.”

Ace laughed a little, and the sound loosened something. The chalk tickled. The chalk broke. Mai cursed softly, rolled another stub out from under a bowl, and kept going. When she finished, she blew the dust off and leaned down without thinking to kiss the corner of her own ugly symbol.

The room came back into itself a fraction better aligned.

Mai exhaled and sat back. “Files say the choir room had five pillars,” she said. “Five bars. One circle. The Choir-Mother beat time with a rod. They set the children in the ring and tuned the room by their

breathing. They thought they were hearing God. They were hearing the foundation settle. The First Voice is the key of stone remembering its quarry.”

“Say it again,” Ace said, and the request wasn’t aesthetic. It was armor.

“The First Voice is not a person,” Mai said, patient. “It is the base note of the room when the room is taught to sing. The Order used children’s bones because they wanted clean resonance. Their ethics were an afterthought scribbled in margins. You are not their instrument. You are what happens when an instrument learns to decide.”

Ace held that like a small stone in her fist. “Then we go to the quarry,” she said. “We go to the lungs. We take out the rods and we let the room forget the song.”

“We will need a better map,” Mai said. She looked down at the files as if they might set their own corners on fire if she blinked too slowly. “And better masks. And ear protection that isn’t a joke.”

“And a way to make concrete stupid,” Ace said. “Bricks that sweat harder.”

“We’ll borrow Kosta and her brick bag,” Mai said. “And I’ll build a way to make the drains nauseated.”

Ace grinned, small. “Make the city seasick.”

“It deserves it,” Mai said.

Rain tapped the window like someone taking the politest possible liberty. The kettle had gone cold and never complained about it once. Ace stood and tested her body the way one tests a rope—pull, slack, pull. The bars on her chest were still faint and patient. Mai’s ugly symbol sat over them like a ward someone’s grandmother would swear by.

Mai slid the files into a deliberate stack and tied them again. She held the string a moment before she made the knot, and in that moment Ace saw what it cost her not to open another page.

“I’ll sleep,” Ace said.

“You will,” Mai answered. “I will pretend to.”

“No,” Ace said softly. “You will sleep, too. If the First Voice wants an audience, it can wait for morning.”

Mai looked like a person who had a long argument queued in her head with a very old building. Then she let it go. “Two hours,” she bargained.

“Three,” Ace countered.

“Two and a half.”

“Done.”

They turned the overhead off. The city breathed. The room steadied. In the dark, the cough of a transformer three streets away sounded like a man clearing his throat to confess and then deciding not to. Ace lay back, and Mai lay beside her, shoulder to shoulder, not theatrical, just aligned. Somewhere below, a drain attempted a scale and thought better.

When sleep came this time, it brought the old woman again—but further back, before the robe, in a

market where she sold thread and vinegar. She counted change with the same mouth she'd used to count breath. She looked up and saw the child with the braid and decided in the space between two heartbeats that the child would be made useful.

Ace reached across years and slapped the old woman's hand. The coin fell, rolled under the table, and stopped against a nail with a satisfying clink. The old woman didn't bend to pick it up. She followed the sound with her eyes and smiled with all her gums.

"Clever," Violet purred, from nowhere and from the place where knives wait. "Would you like me to bite for you."

"No," Ace thought, or said, and it made no difference which voice carried it. "You'll get your teeth later."

Morning arrived as a grayness that did not ask permission. The bars on her sternum lay quiet as pencil. Mai's chalk mark had smeared where sleep moved skin against fabric. Mai's hair had found its way into Ace's throat and refused to leave; Ace blew it out of the way and Mai made a small sound that meant you got away with it only because she loved you.

"Two and a half," Mai said, eyes still closed.

"Three," Ace said, and kissed her shoulder, a quick punctuation mark.

They sat up into the day. The river's edge had gone to steel. A barge pushed a slow square through it like a thought refusing to leave. The city held its breath in a different way now—anticipation, not obligation.

Mai pulled the map over. "Customs house," she said. "Storm junction here. Sub-basement under the west end. Two service tunnels that got bricked after the flood fifteen years ago." She tapped a street. "There's a bakery above the eastern wall. They'll hate us."

"We'll buy bread," Ace said. She stretched, cat-long, and cracked her knuckles, small sounds like breaking sugar. "We go in clean. No speeches. No letting it finish a song. If it writes on me, you—"

"Cover your mouth," Mai said over her, already getting up. "I remember."

Ace stood too. The lines on her chest ghosted the room's cool air. Mai's ugliness sat proud over them. The kettle protested its own neglect and went back to work when Mai turned the flame. Outside, the first small sun of the day tried the river and decided it could manage.

They would go under the customs house. They would step into a room that had been taught to sing. They would pull the rods. They would teach concrete to forget.

Ace rolled her shoulders until the katanas settled easy against her spine, like thoughts in order. "We make it unlearn," she said.

Mai poured water over leaves and nodded once. "We make it shut up," she said, which was the same plan with less poetry.

The city listened. Far below, in the lungs that had once liked the taste of children's breath, something shifted like an old man turning over in bed. It hummed one bar, just to hear itself. It waited.

They let it. Only for now. —

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