

Chapter 4 — The First Voice

The customs house hunched over the river like a bureaucrat over a ledger, all soot-streaked columns and a pediment that wanted you to think of law. The bakery on the corner wanted you to think of sugar. Heat breathed from its door in sweet, forgiving gusts. Mai bought a paper bag of morning rolls and a black coffee she didn't plan to drink. Ace ate one roll standing on the curb with steam in her throat and butter on the thumb she wiped against her coat. It felt like paying respect to a neighborhood that was about to be asked for something.

Kosta met them at the alley mouth with her duffel of sweating bricks and a look that said she'd slept fewer hours than she recommends to patients. She took a roll without ceremony and passed Ace a pair of foam earplugs that looked like sleeping pills. "If it climbs," she said, "don't be brave."

Ace tucked the plugs in a pocket. "I'll try something new."

A city schematic lay on Mai's tablet like fish bones—ribs of service tunnels, the spine of the storm line, little hatch marks where a flood fifteen years ago taught everyone humility. The bakery's wall sat atop the eastern edge of a sub-basement that once stored seized contraband and now stored damp and mice. There were two bricked corridors. There was also, if you asked the hum in the pavement, a way.

"Back stairs," Mai said, mouth full of roll, pointing with the coffee lid toward a narrow door beside the bakery's delivery hatch. "If the plan is a sin against architecture, that's where you hide it."

It was. The door had a padlock someone loved and oiled. Mai kissed two wires together and it remembered its obligations to the concept of open. The stairwell tasted of mildew and paperwork. Light leaked down in thin, patient strips.

Ace went first, sword sheathed across her back, free hand on the rail to feel the iron hum. It did, faintly—like a man humming to himself while he waits outside a room where he's not invited. The further they went, the more honest the temperature became. The bag of bricks sweated harder. Kosta breathed through her nose, counting without seeming to. Mai's boots were very quiet. She had fixed the soles.

The door at the bottom was concrete pretending to be stone, a bureaucrat's idea of secure. Someone had plastered over an arch once; then a different someone cut a square into the plaster the size of a prideful man's shoulders. The square wore a steel sheet and four bolts. Kosta set bricks at its corners without being asked, and the sheet went from sulky to sullen. Mai knelt and pressed her palm to the seam, frowning. "It's not locked," she said. "It's persuaded."

"By who," Kosta asked.

Mai tilted her head downward. "By what's downstairs."

Ace put her shoulder to the steel and pushed. The persuasion yielded. The square swung on hinges that had been told all their lives they were not hinges. Cold breathed out, damp and mineral, with a quality that made skin remember bruises.

They went in. The corridor beyond was cut by men who intended a straight line and then learned about water. It doglegged twice. The hum set up housekeeping along Ace's spine, polite at first, then more forward, like a host reminding a guest about the house rules. Her sternum prickled. She touched the chalk where Mai had drawn it and felt the tiniest warmth, as if a match had been struck in a pocket.

"Temperature drop of three degrees," Kosta said softly, glancing at a sensor clipped to her bag strap. "And—" She checked a second meter. "An honest-to-God pressure gradient."

"Not God," Mai said. "Don't give it the word."

They found the first bricked corridor by the simple method of walking into the wall that claimed not to be one. The bricks were newer than the customs house but older than the flood. Someone had loved them enough to lay a header course and tuck-point. Someone had then cut a fist-sized hole low to listen, and then filled it with a rag and forgotten it.

Mai pressed the rag with her knuckle. It pulsed against her skin with the slow insistence of a heart too big for the body around it. She pressed her ear to the hole and lifted her head as if something had shouted into her skull. "It's singing," she said. "It's also listening for its own echo."

"That's what rooms do," Kosta said, not trying to be clever. "They talk to themselves."

Ace set her palm to the brick. It felt like a dog with its head in your lap—a weight that wanted something. "If I open a little," she said, to both of them and to the thing that hummed, "we get a map."

Mai shifted her weight and didn't say Don't. She said, "I will count with you. My hand is right here if I have to cover your mouth."

"That is a very specific sentence," Kosta said, after a beat.

"It works," Mai said.

Ace loosened the collar inside her, the one she'd invented for herself when she first realized you can choose where the world lives in your body. The song slid in through the crack, crisp as the first mouthful of cold water on a fevered day. Her pupils widened. The corridor's light narrowed to a stripe. She did not let it make the next move. "One," she said, and Mai said "Two," and Ace said "Three," and by "Five" the pressure had something to rub against that was not empty compliance.

The bricked wall gave up a secret without any theater of groaning. It adjusted. The note under Ace's breastbone sharpened. The map arrived not as an image but as a certainty of distances—fourteen long steps to a stairwell, eight down, then a low door, then a room that made circles important.

Kosta watched the pulse jumping in Ace's throat. "You're getting marks," she said, quiet. "Lines."

Mai's palm was there before Ace needed it, hovering the way she had the night before. The chalk mark warmed under her hand as if hands could teach stone how to behave. The lines under Ace's skin lit—not glowing, exactly, but present, like old ink catching the light. Circle, bars. The ugly square through it: Mai's small act of vandalism.

"It doesn't like your handwriting," Ace said, and had to laugh, because the laugh kept the breath honest. "Good."

She shut the collar. The pressure fought to get its fingers in the door and then deemed better of it. The bricked corridor remembered it was a bricked corridor. The rag stopped pretending to be a pulse, and went back to being a rag.

"Fourteen forward," Ace said. "Eight down. Then someone's idea of sacred."

“Sacred is just expensive,” Mai said, and shouldered her bag.

They walked. The corridor’s second turn opened onto stairs damp as a mouth. The hum in the iron handrail behaved itself under Kosta’s bricks. Ace’s marks receded to quiet pencil. At the bottom, a low door made of old wood tried to convince them they were too tall. It had a circle carved into it with five bars inside, the way a bored clerk carves on a blotter. The bars were scored deep where someone had retraced them many times to keep the idea fresh.

Mai ran her fingers along the scoring as if she were reading. “Hundreds of small obediences,” she said. “That’s what this is. Not one big sin. A thousand habits.”

Ace set her palm to the circle. It was cold. Not dead—nothing here was dead—but tired. “Are you ready,” she asked.

Mai made three adjustments to the small pack under her jacket—ear, throat, pulse—and nodded. Kosta dropped two bricks by the jambs and palmed a third, ready to seat it anywhere the air tried to grow teeth.

They went in.

It wasn’t large, the choir room. The men who built it had imagined cathedrals they could never afford and built instead a space big enough to be important to them. Five pillars lifted the roof. They weren’t Roman or Doric or any other kind of column. They were the kind you make when you are building a prayer to your own cleverness—fluted, but wrong, each with a thin cavity cut through the center so you could slide a rod and make the stone behave like a pipe. The floor held a circle, worn smooth by small feet. Inside it, the bars, retraced, retraced, retraced.

The first voice was the room’s breath, constant and patient. It did not start when they entered; it had never stopped. It was the tone a cave makes when its water has been taught a schedule. It was the hum of load-bearing walls remembering the quarry in their sleep. It gathered itself in the cut pillars and shook loose in the circle and climbed up through the throat of the old stairwell and made the bakery’s pans vibrate in the mornings.

Mai’s exhale was low and obscene and reverent, both. She holstered it as soon as it left her mouth and went to work.

Six steps around the circle, a kneel to set a brick, a murmur that was not a prayer so much as a contract with physics. Kosta peeled tape with her teeth and set sensors as if she could suture stone. Ace stayed out of the circle and watched the way the room listened to them. It did. It listened the way a trained animal watches the door you’re headed toward—ears forward, attention without malice, but not love.

Bright had been right in the particular and wrong in the way men like him tend to be wrong. The term fit the measurements. The room liked Ace because she was a match to the cavity it had been cut around. But the thing that liked her was not a mind. It was a key in a lock feeling for the pins.

“Say it plain,” Ace said, as much to her as to Mai. “For when the counting starts later.”

Mai set a brick at the base of the nearest pillar and sat back on her heels. Her hands were steady. “No entity,” she said. “No spirit. No god. You don’t have to kill a person to stop this. You have to unbuild a setting.”

Kosta added, without looking up, “You don’t need to blame a voice for doing what voices do when

given a throat.”

Ace let the room’s breath come to the border of her skin and stop. “Then we take away the throat.”

They tested the depth of the cavities with wire and a small plumb bob that made a sound when it kissed the bottom like a coin touching a plate in a temple. The rods the Order had used were gone—metal thieves or prudence; it didn’t matter. The holes remained, honest as bad grammar. Mai measured diameters and looked at Ace’s throat, then away, annoyed with the correspondence. “We plug these,” she said. “Not with metal. With something that eats sound.”

“Cork,” Kosta offered, dry as dust.

“Cork and pitch,” Mai said, instantly inside the problem, “and a wrap that refracts. Old quilt batting dipped in slurry. Ugly as sin.” She looked around as if the room might register the insult and sulk.

Ace’s sternum ticked. She did not open that inner latch; she slid a fingernail under it and gave the thing one instant of air. The marks rose. The ugly square stood over them like a bad seal anyone’s grandmother would swear by. The room leaned toward her, interested the way instruments are interested in the hand that knows where to put the fingers. In that leaning she felt, not words, but memory—stone under river, river under sky, sky under the idea of law, law written into ledger lines by someone who liked neatness more than mercy.

She shut it. The lean eased. Mai did not say anything, but her hand twitched the tiniest fraction toward Ace’s mouth and then away, as though the thought had completed itself and did not need the gesture.

“Four plugs,” Mai said. “We leave one open for now or we make it thrash.”

“Make it thrash,” Ace said. “I want it to show me where it runs next.”

Kosta dug in her bag. “I have three that will hold for twelve hours,” she said. “Fourth is a bastard I welded off a traffic cone. It will work and you will hate looking at it.”

“I love hating things that work,” Mai said. “Show me.”

They set the plugs like surgeons doing old, ugly medicine. Cork driven hard, pitch smeared, batting wrapped and tamped until the pillars’ throats remembered being stone. The room’s tone lost its sheen. It dropped a register and then another, tried a new harmony, found none. The circle on the floor warmed under Ace’s heels where she wouldn’t step into it. The carved bars sulked. The bakery’s pans, two floors up, went quiet in their racks.

“Three,” Mai said, breath short now, hair sticking to her cheekbone. “Cone.”

Kosta produced the cone plug with the satisfaction of a woman who owns a drawer full of improvised salvation. It was exactly what she’d promised: orange, ugly, wrong, perfect. She seated it with a mallet and the room said, clearly, enough.

Not with words. With a shudder that rippled the dust in the carvings, with a pressure wave that pressed Ace’s ribs and tried to climb into her mouth. Ace didn’t open. The chalk mark heated like a coin left on a radiator. The faint lines brightened and then dulled as if embarrassed to have been seen. Mai’s hand covered Ace’s mouth without touching, and Ace bit air hard enough to convince her jaw that it had teeth in it.

“Hold,” Mai said. Not a plea. The old kind of instruction she gave machines before they tried to be clever.

The wave passed. The tone dropped one more rung. The foundation under their feet remembered it was a slab that owed no one music.

A small thing moved in the corner then—a rat, maybe, or a trick of stone and breath. Ace turned her head and saw it for what it was: a string tied to a rod that had once hung bells. The rod was gone. The string swayed anyway, pendulum with no clock.

“Leave it,” Mai said. “We don’t give it any more instruments. It can shake threads by itself all day.”

They stood in the suddenly ordinary room and listened to the silence that wasn’t silence: water making its case in the walls, air thinking about drafts, the little thuds of their own hearts deciding not to get dramatic. Ace’s marks quieted. Her skin felt like hers again. She stepped to the circle’s edge and looked down as if expecting to see her own small feet buried under the stone.

“Tell me if I’m wrong,” she said. “They thought they were bringing something here.”

“They were.” Mai’s voice was flat. “They brought the quarry’s note into a house and taught a town to breathe to it. They built a mouth on an old throat. They convinced themselves the throat was a god so they didn’t have to hear their own choices.”

“First Voice,” Kosta said, with a clinician’s dispassion. “Which is not first, and not a voice.”

Ace crouched. She put two fingers against the carved bars the way you might touch the name of a dead person on a headstone. “No more,” she said. Not to the stone—stone obeys physics, not petitions. To herself. To the part of her that kept old drawers nailed shut.

Mai, behind her, said softly, “Look at your chest.”

Ace did. The faint lines were still there, patience personified. Mai’s ugly square was still square and still ugly and still hers. But now, where the circle’s ghost met the square’s corner, a new mark had appeared, hair-thin and faint as a vein in a leaf: a diagonal, not theirs and not the Order’s, a line that didn’t belong to any of the old obedience.

She touched it. It tingled, not unpleasant.

“It’s you,” Mai said. Not awed. Affectionate. “You wrote back.”

“Apparently I have terrible handwriting,” Ace said, absurdly pleased. “I’m learning from the best.”

Kosta repacked her tools with the exhale of a person who has watched a fever break. “This will not hold forever,” she said. “Nothing does. But it will make the room remember what it is when it forgets it wants to be a bell.”

“It buys us time,” Mai said. “Time to find where the rest of the lungs run. Time to make a bigger wedge.”

“And time,” Ace said, “for Bright to deliver his apology at the end of an email.”

Mai’s mouth went sideways. “Subject line: Everything You Should Have Said Two Years Ago.”

The pressure in the room had stopped trying to decide their breathing for them. That was the

measure that mattered. They did not linger for sentiment. Sentiment is a kind of prayer, and this place would have eaten it.

They backed out the way they had come, leaving the cone plug like an insult, leaving bricks and sensors and a string that could sway itself into exhaustion. At the top of the stairs, the bakery smelled like fruit tarts. The woman behind the counter had flour on her wrist where she'd pushed hair back, and when Ace bought two tarts she wrapped them with the efficiency of a very small priest whose sacraments are sugar and wax paper.

On the sidewalk, the customs house hunched on. The river made steel of itself and flowed stubbornly toward the sea that had taught it every story it knew. The city held its breath in a new way—like a room where someone had opened a window, not a word.

Mai handed Ace a tart box and looked up at the cornice, tracing with her eyes the old stresses and new. “We didn’t kill it,” she said. “We untuned it.”

“Good,” Ace said around a mouthful of fruit. “Killing makes ghosts. Untuning makes dust.”

Kosta slung her bag. “You two are intolerable when you win.”

“We’re intolerable when we lose,” Mai said mildly. “We’re just louder.”

Ace’s phone buzzed. A message from Bright, because of course. A link. A promise of files. A sentence that didn’t waste time pretending their approvals mattered: Movement under the river line. The map breathing again. Meet at dusk.

Ace showed Mai the screen. Mai looked from the phone to the river and back. “Discord and betrayal,” she said, in the dry tone she used when she wouldn’t jinx it by naming the next chapter out loud.

“Dusk,” Ace said. The marks on her sternum lay quiet under the chalk and the new thin stroke. The cone plug sat four floors below them like a rude word that still did its job. The first voice went on, further away, smaller, a base note you’d only hear if you put your ear to stone and pretended you believed in gods.

“Eat your tart,” Mai said. “Then we go make the river seasick.”

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Last update: **16/03/2026 17:47**



