

Chapter 5 — Discord and Betrayal

Dusk sat on the river like a weight the city couldn't quite lift. The warehouses along the quay lit their sodium halos in a staggered line; the drawbridge ribs threw bars over the water that looked too much like the mark on Ace's chest to be chance. The tide nuzzled the pilings like a patient animal.

Bright chose the kind of meeting place men choose when they want to be dramatic while pretending they're just being practical: a maintenance pier fenced with chain link, a safety sign half torn, a coil of hawser as thick as a man's thigh sleeping by a bollard. The Foundation van idled nearby with its lights off, humming to itself, not quite in key with the river.

Kosta stood at the pier's head with her bag and her tired, stubborn jaw. Vasiliev perched on a case, tablet blue against his face, eyes gone hollow with the light that eats sleep. Bright leaned on the rail with his coat collar up, the ruby catching whatever light would have it. He didn't turn when Ace and Mai stepped onto the pier. He knew how to use stillness.

Mai ignored the theater. She set a brick on the grating with a click and the metal decided to be a walkway and not a tuning fork. "Movement under the line," she said, without greeting. "Show me."

Vasiliev didn't make them ask twice. He threw the river's underbelly onto the tablet—a map of currents and pressure pulled from a scatter of illegal sensors. There, in pale frequencies, a line. Not smooth. Saw-toothed. The hum that had lived under the customs house had shifted, found the old culverts under the bridge, and started crawling. It wasn't a flow. It was lungs remembering that ribs can move.

Mai drew a finger along the line. "It's reaching for the pylons," she said. "If you wanted to teach the bridge to sing, that's where you'd start."

"Teaching bridges to sing is above my pay grade," Bright said lightly, turning at last. His eyes under the evening had the kind of bright that comes off a blade when you wipe it clean. "But here we are."

Ace stepped to the rail. The river was dark enough to be honest; it reflected only the shapes that insisted. The marks on her chest woke like snakes and then settled when the wind skinned the water the wrong way. "What changed," she asked.

"We did," Bright said. "We took away its easy throat. It looked for a bigger one."

"You sound pleased," Mai said, and the softness of the accusation made it cut deeper.

"I am pleased that we know where it's going," Bright said. He flashed the grin and let it die. "I am less pleased about the protocol the site pinged through as soon as they saw your map."

There it was, the word he'd meant to bury under three more: protocol. It clinked when it hit the pier like a coin under a stall.

Mai didn't give him the favor of a pause. "Name it," she said.

Bright rested his forearms on the rail and looked at the bridge like a man pretending he hadn't written his confession. "Cantor," he said. "As in, the person who leads a congregation when the priest wants to look guiltless. It's a contingency for resonance events that exceed urban threshold values. It...includes language about isolating the nearest matching instrument."

"Kieli suomeksi," Mai said, and the fact that she used her first language curled the pier's air.

“Kite,” Kosta translated in a dry murmur, eyes still on the water. “They want a person-shaped tool.”

“They want a safe city,” Bright said. He didn’t flinch from the uglier truth. He let it sit. “And they want to know what they’re dealing with before it decides their street grids are hymnals.”

“Käytännössä?” Mai asked.

“Practically,” Bright said, “they asked me to induce a full resonance event and capture the response profile from the Silent—” He caught himself like a man on a step he hadn’t seen. “From you.”

Ace let the river’s damp sit on her skin. She didn’t reach for her swords. She didn’t need the weight of them to steady her. The pier was metal; it tried to be a note. The brick underfoot made it a place to stand. “Induce,” she said. “With what.”

Bright touched the ruby. He didn’t look at his hand when he did it; that would have been too neat. “With this,” he said, finally honest. “It’s a stabilizer. It can hold a key the way a glass can hold a tone. If I step it closer to your mark and sing into it, the room will oblige.”

Mai’s fingers flexed around nothing. She had the look of someone doing math they hate and doing it right. “You had that on you last night.”

“I always have it,” Bright said. “It keeps rooms that like me from liking me too much.”

“You were going to use it on her,” Mai said, the sentence as flat as hospital light.

“I was going to use it on the river,” Bright said without softening what came next. “And you, if it got there first.”

Kosta let out a slow breath that didn’t quite become a laugh. “Discord and betrayal,” she said under it. “We should have named the chapter out loud.”

Ace watched the bridge ribs make bars on the water. She touched the chalk through her shirt and it was warm; Mai’s ugly square did its small work. The new thin diagonal itched like a dog remembering a bone. She didn’t ask the voice inside to comment. It would have made jokes about choirs and conductors.

“Say the rest,” she said, and didn’t look away from the pylons.

Bright nodded once, as if she had given him permission to jump and he knew he’d hit water either way. “The files I sent,” he said. “You’ve opened them.”

“We read enough,” Mai said. “We’ll read the rest when I can afford to gnash my teeth without biting through to my tongue.”

“The point,” Bright said, “is that the Silent Vessel experiments didn’t die with the people who ran them. The math is older than the Foundation and it will outlive it unless someone burns the habit of it out of the world. My site is better than many. Not as good as it should be. They trust me to do the ugly parts because I look like a man who knows where to put the breakpoints.”

“And do you,” Ace asked.

“I know where to stop,” Bright said. “Most days.”

“And today,” Mai said, “they told you not to.”

He didn't smile. "They told me to deliver a result. They did not tell me who to be."

The river under the bridge made an adjustment unrelated to currents. The sensors on Vasiliev's case ticked like anxious insects. The saw-tooth line on the tablet sharpened into something that looked too much like notation. One-two-three-four-five in the pylons. The culverts took the count and fed it to the span.

"We don't have time for a fight," Kosta said, not as a peacekeeper so much as a nurse triaging a hallway. "We pick a verb and do it."

"Verb," Mai said, and the word steadied the pier more than the brick. "Untune."

Bright's shoulders lost a fraction of their hunched penance. He was very good at stepping into a plan as soon as it existed. "Then we need destructive harmony," he said. "Not noise. Noise it can eat. We need the wrong key, everywhere, at once."

The van door slid open without anyone touching it; Vasiliev had already been moving. "I have four transducers and not enough power," he said. "We can make the pylons hate themselves, but the bridge will like it."

"We borrow power," Mai said. "City grid. The drawbridge relay. The ferry dock. Every bad transformer in a two-block radius."

"Illegal," Bright said, almost admiring. "Expensive."

"Send me the invoice," Mai said. She crouched and sketched a quick cruciform on the pier with chalk. Not a cross; a placement grid. "Kosta, bricks on the east and west pier heads—no, not there, there. Vasiliev, hang your transducers on the fenders below the deck; I don't care if you get your shoes wet. Bright—"

"Yes, dear," he said, which earned him exactly the look it deserved.

"Hold your pendant until I say," Mai said. "Then you sing into the wrong shape."

"Copy," Bright said, without irony. He slipped the ruby's chain over his head and cupped the stone in his palm. It looked obscenely organic, like a clot pulled cleanly from a wound. The river loved it instantly. The sensors ticked as if it were raining.

Ace moved along the rail. The marks under her shirt were watchful and still. Whenever the pressure nosed toward her mouth she said "Mai," and the word cut the air into pieces that would not fit in.

"On your word," Bright called, at the head of the pier, eyes on Mai, not on Ace as an object but on the only person in the world he would let hold the metronome.

Mai didn't answer, not with words. She tapped the bridge's drawing on the tablet—there, there, there—and the Foundation's stolen power woke one circuit at a time like a field of cheap lights going up for a carnival. Transducers kissed wood and metal. Kosta's bricks sweated. The drawbridge relay stuttered and then, bribed, obeyed.

"Now," Mai said, and the wrong key went into the world like a rumor.

It wasn't louder. It was sided. The pylons held an old bass like a man with his hand on his own throat to feel if he's lying. The culverts preferred their learned count. The wrong key didn't fight them; it laid

itself across and allowed the friction to do the work. The bridge didn't sing; it argued with itself.

Ace felt the argument more sharply than the others because her sternum had always been a bad mediator. The chalk mark heated. The thin new stroke she'd written—untidy, defiant—picked up the difference and passed it along her nerves. She felt where the pylons pulled and where the culverts yielded. She stepped three paces left and the wrongness climbed her spine and made a sound in her teeth. She smiled, which felt too much like baring them.

Vasiliev cursed in Russian without stopping his hands. "It fights, it fights," he said through his teeth, and the tablet showed it: the saw-tooth line shredding, recombining, catching, losing its clean edges.

"More," Mai said.

Bright sang.

It wasn't dramatic. Of course it wasn't. His voice was good, not trained, the kind any man has who has learned to hum in stairwells late at night. He wasn't singing the First Voice; he was singing the wrong one on purpose, laying the pendant's trapped key onto the water like a great, heavy hand. The ruby held the note exactly the way physics had promised it would. The pylons took it the way a drunk takes a dare. They lost time.

The river stuttered. The bridge complained. A brace somewhere under the deck gave a little, honest groan that had nothing to do with ghosts. The saw-tooth on the tablet broke in the middle and tried to remember itself and failed.

Ace's mouth opened a fraction without her permission. She wanted, for a brutal second, to match Bright because it is tempting to join a fight that is going your way. Mai's hand was there, not covering her mouth, only present, like the promise it stood in for. "Don't," she said. "That's their math."

"Copy," Ace said, the word bright on her tongue.

The wrong note did its job. The learned count lost syllables. One-two— —five. The pylons spat what they couldn't hold. The culverts went back to water. The map on the tablet grayed out where the argument had settled into sulking.

The pendant dimmed in Bright's hand. He let the note die with a care Ace recognized from knife-work; he didn't twist as he set it down. He didn't pocket it. He put it on the rail and stepped away from it like a thing that had already taken too much of him.

Kosta wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and looked at the bridge with the fond contempt one reserves for old machines that almost remember how to be useful. "You'll ache tomorrow," she told it. "Good."

Mai let herself breathe like a person who had finished a problem without liking the method. She didn't smile. She did touch Ace's sleeve and keep it, not to ground herself but to ground the next moment.

Because the next moment was the part where the city, having been denied a grand crescendo, decided to look for attention elsewhere.

The van door slammed open. Two men in Foundation gray stepped out, uniforms fitting like apologies. They didn't aim guns; they aimed a cage—pretty, freestanding metal with a lattice that remembered Faraday and a hum the pendant liked. They didn't look at Mai. They looked at Ace the way men look at expensive instruments. It was almost reverent.

"Protocol Cantor," the taller one said to Bright, like a child proud of a memorized line.

"No," Bright said.

"It's keyed," the other one said, not hearing. "We get a clean capture now, we can forestall—"

"No," Bright said, quiet. He moved in a way that would have read as lazy if you didn't know what knives look like sheathed in manners. He stepped between the cage and Ace with all the grace of a man who wanted to be forgiven by someone who hadn't decided yet if she could. "Stand down."

"This is site directive," the tall one said, lifting the cage a fraction, meaning to set it, pretending he didn't see the way the pendant sat on the rail like a red eye.

Mai moved. The brick under the cage's feet sang against the metal lattice exactly wrong, and the device hiccuped thoughtfully. Ace stepped to the side, clean, letting Bright's body be useful. Kosta's hand appeared with a pair of wire cutters that had fixed more lives than protocols, and the cage's power umbilical chewed through like old candy.

The hum died. The men didn't lift their hands. Their faces showed the dawning realization that no one had briefed them on whose chapter this was.

"Take that back to the van," Bright said, not loud. "Tell Site that Protocol Cantor is suspended under my authority on environmental grounds. If they dislike my interpretation, they can remove me after we have finished cleaning up their mess."

"You don't have that authority," the tall one said, brave in the way men are when they think paper will hold up their courage.

"I have the river," Bright said, and only then did he turn his head, a fraction, toward Ace, not to see if she was impressed but to let the comb go through his hair the other direction for once. "And I have my preferences."

They hesitated, because obedience takes practice and this situation had not been rehearsed. Mai solved it by picking up the pendant between finger and thumb and holding it like a specimen. "You want to put this in a box with my partner," she said, calm as old ice. "You can try again when you have a letter with ten signatures, and you can bring ten men with ten letters, and I will bite off each of your ring fingers in order of ascending rank."

The shorter one blanched. The taller one decided—wisely—that he had become an extra in the wrong scene. They retreated with their pretty cage, trying to look like men executing a strategic reallocation of resources, not like boys fleeing a room where their mothers were tired.

Bright let out a breath he might claim later was the river's. "Betrayal would have been me letting them try," he said. "Discord is what we're left with."

Mai put the pendant down where it had been, simple, as if to say: we returned your toy intact; next time bring better manners. She looked at Bright without sweetness. "I don't need you to be good," she said. "I need you to be specific. If you point that thing at her again without me saying when, you will lose teeth."

"Understood," Bright said, and for a heartbeat the grin on his face wasn't armor but gratitude for a boundary given instead of a knife.

Vasiliev's tablet chimed the way a hospital monitor does when a patient doesn't die. The map under the bridge held. The saw-tooth dulled to a bruise. The pylons sulked, their count broken. The culverts became practical again: places for old shoes and rubbish and the city's least metaphysical rats.

Ace's marks cooled. The thin new diagonal felt less like a cut and more like a stitch. She leaned on the rail where the pendant had been and let the river's breath go through her without stopping to ask for a place to live.

"What else," she asked Bright, because there is always one more thing someone like him holds behind the tongue.

He didn't make her pull it. "There's a Cathedral," he said, looking out at the line of warehouses where the lights made the windows into rows of patient eyes. "Not metaphorical. A chamber built with ambition and shoddy funding under the ash yards upriver. It's where the Order rehearsed their best work when they wanted to impress men who liked to be impressed."

"Cathedral of Ash," Mai said, in the dry, precise tone she used to name the chapter that comes after the one they're in. "Of course there is."

"It will not be a room that agrees to forget," Bright said. "And it will not be a room that accepts plugs."

"Then we bring a different wedge," Mai said. She tapped the tablet, drawing a quick shape no one would recognize but her—a map, a grid, a plan at the speed of anger. "We'll make it argue with itself until the walls crack."

Kosta slung her bag, the weight familiar. "You know," she said to no one in particular, "if you hum long enough into ash, you get glass."

"Good," Ace said. She pushed off the rail and the pier remembered being a piece of human infrastructure that had no business in myth. "I like breaking pretty things that were made to make people small."

Bright picked up the pendant and didn't put it on. He held it in his fist like a vice he meant, for once, to use on himself. "I will send the maps," he said. "The ones I shouldn't have. If I vanish between here and my desk, assume someone liked the protocol more than my preferences."

"If you vanish," Mai said, "I will come to your site with a shopping list and a magnet big enough to give your servers strokes."

"I'll leave a key under the mat," Bright said, and there it was again: the joke in the shape of a peace offering.

They broke the meeting like people who had learned not to linger after the music stops. Vasiliev packed the sensors like small animals, soothing them with habit. Kosta passed them both gauze and told them to drink water. Bright didn't offer rides. He wasn't stupid.

On the quay, the air smelled like wet rope and cheap fish. The bridge held. The river remembered how to be river. Ace and Mai walked with the muddled grace of people who have stepped away from a ritual and remembered the street names on the first try.

"Angry," Mai said, after a block, not asking.

“Yes,” Ace said.

“At Bright or at the world.”

“At the part of the world that teaches men like Bright to be useful first,” Ace said. “At the part of me that wanted to answer when he sang. At the part of the city that likes that count because it’s easier than listening to its own traffic.”

Mai made a small, displeased noise. “We’ll starve every instrument we can reach,” she said. “And when we hit the Cathedral, we bring enough wrong notes to make angels throw up.”

Ace laughed, short and sharp, cut off before it echoed. “How many wrong notes do we own.”

“As many as you can swing,” Mai said, “and as many as I can build, and as many as Kosta can carry, and as many as Bright can sneak past his supervisor while pretending he lost the receipt.”

They walked on. The chalk under Ace’s shirt had smeared into her skin in a way that would not last but mattered now. The thin diagonal she’d written over it felt like her own bad handwriting learning to become a signature.

Ahead, upriver, the ash yards brooded like a bruise. Somewhere under them a chamber waited that had been taught to turn people into rooms. It would be beautiful, the way a lie is beautiful when it is supported by stone. It would listen. It would expect the count. It would be confused when they refused to oblige.

“Tomorrow,” Mai said.

“Tonight,” Ace said, and then, feeling the sensible ache in her legs, amended, “After dinner.”

“Compromise,” Mai said. “We’ll eat on the way and claim we have manners.”

They didn’t take the long road home. They took the one that smelled like dumplings and hot oil. The city, denied its choir, made peace with traffic and dogs and the hiss of rain. Under the ash, a room hummed into the dark because it did not yet know how to do anything else. —

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