

Chapter 6 — The Cathedral of Ash

The ash yards had once been a factory's bad conscience. They slouched upriver where the wind was too lazy to carry the dust away, mounds of clinker and cinder glass frozen mid-collapse, weeds growing a theology of their own through slag. Rusted conveyors lay like broken ribs against the night. Out past the chain, the river shouldered past without apology.

Mai stopped at the fence and listened—not with her ears first. She closed those off with the plugs Kosta had palmed to her at the bridge, but with the bones along her neck. The wrong key they'd driven into the pylons still wavered in the far background like a recent argument. Under it something else breathed: deeper, older, content with its bad habits.

"Here," she said, pointing at a slumped retaining wall where cinders had poured and fused like melted sugar. "Somebody tunneled under their own pride."

Ace moved her hand along the sag the way you stroke an animal's ribs to find where it flinches least. There: a rectangle pretending to be geology. She put shoulder into it; the rectangle remembered it was a hatch and swung with a damp sigh. Cold rose out of the dark, coal-smelling and patient.

They went down with headlamps gutted to the dimmest. The air got honest, then mean, then weirdly sweet where ash had made glass and glass had bottled smells that should have escaped decades ago. The shaft opened into a drift chamber ribbed with slag—frozen waves, black and dull as a priest's shoes. The hum wasn't in the walls yet; it held itself back one room like a host who wants you to look around first and see how clever he is.

Kosta's brick bag squeaked. She'd insisted on coming because she didn't trust either Foundation boys or physics left unsupervised. "I'll stage the anchors here," she whispered. "If you run, run toward me. Not up the shaft—it'll bottleneck, and I won't write obituaries with words like 'wedge.'"

Mai touched her knuckles to Kosta's, quick. "Don't let Bright play with his jewelry."

"He didn't bring it," Kosta said, surprising them both. "He left it in a locker with a note: if you open this, you have to listen to me gloat later. He's learning."

"Fear is a teacher," Ace murmured. The chalk line under her shirt warmed at the joke. The thin new slash she'd written on herself itched like a scab determined to become a scar.

They took the right-hand tunnel because it sounded wrongest. It opened into a throat where cinder had been poured in a ring, and beyond that: architecture.

Calling it a cathedral was generous to actual cathedrals, but the ambition was correct. Five pillars rose, not of carved stone but of poured slag; inside each, a bore ran true enough to tell you someone had been very patient with a very hot drill. Above them, an arched roof fused from ash and glass caught their lamp light and tossed it back bent, like reflections on a bottle pulled from a bonfire. The floor had learned the old geometry: circle, five bars. Not chalk this time. Inlaid with strips of fused glass that glowed faintly with the river's stolen breath.

And the sound.

It didn't arrive; it had been there, and their ears finally found it after the plugs became suggestions instead of walls. Not loud. Immersive. The First Voice, except richer for having more throat to play with—pillars, roof, floor, all tuned to a base note and then taught to pretend the base was a god. The air tried to set their teeth to sympathetic vibration. Ace felt it in the hinges of her jaw, in the old break

in her left wrist, in the little bones that make a person hear her own heartbeat.

The choir was waiting.

Not like the brittle, plaster-and-tar constructs from the warehouse. These had been annealed by time and intention. Ash packed into muscle, cinder fused into latticework throats, cheeks like mask-plates cut from stove doors, eyes set with marble fragments that had never quite cooled. They stood in the rings and they hummed without moving their mouths, because the room hummed for them.

One figure stood at the circle's heart with hands lifted the way you lift hands to bring order to people who already wanted to obey. Not the bent old Choir-Mother from the ledger, but something made in her image: a tall person in a coat cut like a cassock and stitched with bands of iron that remembered being stave lines. A mask covered the upper half of their face—a plate of fused glass with five thin slots where eyes should be, the bars inverted there. Where a mouth would be, a smooth curve, blank as compliance. The breath that issued from behind the plate did not fog.

"Silent Vessel," the Choir-Master said, and the Voice stroked Ace's bones so the words arrived in two places at once.

Mai's hand covered Ace's wrist and pressed there, a grab of warm gravity in the ocean of tone. "Not yours," she murmured. "Say it."

"Not yours," Ace said, steady enough to surprise herself. The chalk under her sternum heated like a coin left in sun; Mai's ugly square sat loud where the carved circle wanted to be neat. The new diagonal tingled, curious.

"You have come," the Choir-Master continued, not dissuaded by a fact, "from the tributary rooms, from small mouths, from unfaithful arches. You untuned them. Good. You pruned the false notes. Good. Now you will complete the hymn, and the city will be saved from the sickness of discord."

Mai took a small step forward and let the lamp show her face without making it a target. "Saved from traffic, dogs, and people in love arguing about dishes? We prefer those sounds."

The Choir-Master pivoted with unhurried interest. When they looked at Mai, the slots in the mask didn't widen, but something in the room's pressure did, the way air changes before a door opens. "Companion," they said. The title held contempt, the way men who love systems use companion when they mean problem. "You calibrate tools."

"I make sure the people I love don't get turned into them," Mai said.

A small flicker of humor moved under the Choir-Master's voice, not unkind and therefore more dangerous. "The Vessel was made before you," they said, as if chronology were ethics. "She was made to open the mouth. She was made to end the count."

"No." Ace's voice came out quiet and exact. She could feel Violet stand up inside her with that slow feline stretch that meant the blade wanted to be drawn. "I was made," Ace said, "and learned to be someone anyway."

The pillars' throats swelled; the roof leaned. The choir shifted their weight in a way that was not movement but attention migrating from one idea to another. The Choir-Master lowered their hands a fraction, enough to count as interest. "You hear the key without the count," they said. "Rare. We called you all your life. You came at last. Be what you were shaped to be."

Ace stepped to the circle's edge. She did not set a boot inside it. "If I step there," she said, and let the question hang like a weight on a line, "what do you expect to happen."

"Completion," the Choir-Master said. It would have been mercy, the way they said it, if mercy were a method. "You open. We sing through you, not around you. The city's teeth stop chattering. The river lies down. No more waste. No more begging. The old women can die admitting they were right."

Mai's laugh was the kind that only has room in rooms like this because it will starve if you try to put it anywhere else. "What a church," she said. "What an altar. You never had to bury anyone you loved, did you."

"We have buried choirs," the Choir-Master said. "We have buried cities. We will bury this one, if its noises displease the Voice. There will be less pain if the Vessel consents."

Ace lifted her chin a degree. "Consent," she said, because sometimes it's necessary to teach rooms to hear words that don't belong to their rituals. "The child in the circle did not consent. I'm not a child."

A faint, eager tremble ran through the congregation, as if the room had sniffed new air. The Choir-Master kept their hands up, coaxing. "You have tuned tributaries," they said. "This is the river. Rivers want beds. Beds want banks. This is service."

Mai's grip on Ace's wrist tightened, then eased, not a warning, a reminder: my hand; your mouth stays yours. "Service to what," she said. "To stone that learned a song? To a lie that likes being called a hymn?"

"To order," the Choir-Master said with hunger naked as any prayer ever spoken. "To the mercy of sameness. To sparing children the pain of being scattered to the winds of accident. To giving men a thing to hold that doesn't break when they grip it."

"Children will still be born," Mai said, almost gently. "And they'll find ways to make noise. You can't lay hands on that. Not without killing what you say you love."

The Choir-Master's mask tipped. "We can," they said, without heat. "We have. We will." The room agreed like a well-trained choir on an amen.

Violet laughed softly in Ace's head, pleased. Say yes, little blade. Try it once. See what breaks.

"No," Ace said, aloud, and the diagonal in her skin burned like a new vow. "If I open, it will be for me, not for your ledger."

"Ledger," the Choir-Master repeated, like a man tasting a word he'd told his congregation to stop using. "Ungraceful. You prefer a softer gospel?"

"I prefer names that admit what they're doing," Ace said. She took one more step and was a toe-width from the ring. "This room is hungry. It wants a throat. It wants my bones. If I stand there, it will feel good for a beat and then it will own more of me than I like. Ask me again when you're a person."

"That is an unnecessary requirement," the Choir-Master said, and in three of the choir faces Ace saw hurt blink and die. "We will be people again when the song finishes. For now we are function."

"I'm going to make you hate that word," Mai said. She unshouldered her bag. Kosta had made her bricks sweat through whatever trick she'd taught the field generator to use when she wanted physics a little more obedient. "Ace."

Ace didn't have to look to know where Mai's mind had gone. Destructive harmony. Wrong key against the base. But not yet—this room would eat brute volumes, burp, and ask for more. It liked fights it could ring like bells.

"Wait," Ace said, quiet, and Mai did, immediately, because waiting is also a tactic.

Ace raised her hands, empty. She let the room come to the edge of her skin and no further. She listened. Not for a god. For the quarry dreaming under the built lie. The tone's spine. The place where all the other sounds had to stand, no matter what they wanted to be. She could feel how the five bores in the pillars made simple math talk to itself. She could feel where the roof—cheap glass, noble ambition—was weakest. She could feel the place in the circle where a child's bare foot had worn a shallow cup, and she put her heel in it in her mind and said: No.

The diagonal under her skin brightened, a bad stitch catching light.

"What are you doing," the Choir-Master asked, not curious: alarmed for the first time.

"Counting differently," Ace said.

She didn't open. She wrote. Not with chalk. With the small, ugly part of her that had been useful to worse men and had found a way to belong to herself anyway. Her bones held the wrong note by refusing to vibrate the way the room wanted. She took the foundation of the sound in hand the way she took a man's wrist and levered it into an angle it didn't enjoy.

The room flinched. Very slightly. Very specifically.

Mai saw where and moved, setting bricks at two pillar bases like curses, sliding a third across the inlaid bars until it sat where the wrongness made the most dignified noise she'd ever heard: the low, offended groan of old stone asked to reconsider its values.

The choir hissed. Not with mouths; they didn't need those for hissing. The hiss ran along the bore of the pillars and made a standing wave in the roof. The glass sang hair-thin and cracked somewhere up in the arch with a sound like ice remembering the river.

"Enough," the Choir-Master said. The word rode a pressure wave that tried to climb through Ace's front teeth and pull her tongue like an organ stop.

Mai's hand lifted. Ace didn't need it. She bit the air all the same, because that was consent to their own rules. The pressure glanced. The diagonal burned cleanly and cooled.

"You don't have consent," Ace told the room.

"You have no authority," the Choir-Master said, and there was real heat now, some cylinder finally catching and firing in the engine of their certainty. "Only the Voice approves. Only the Voice absolves."

"There is no absolution," Mai said. "There is us, and there is the mess you made to feel like a saint."

Ace took the last step that wasn't a step. She put the flat of her palm not into the circle, but against one of the fused glass bars inlaid there. The floor was warm, the way blood is warm through a bandage. She found the exact spot where a child's heel had learned to pivot: one-two-three—no. A turn that broke the count without breaking the leg.

She pressed.

The bar went dull, the way an ember goes dull under ash. The pillar above it answered without wanting to, its bore losing interest in being a pipe. The wrong key found purchase. The cathedral added its own weight to the argument against itself.

The choir took a step.

Not toward her. Back.

The Choir-Master's head tipped and the plate over their eyes caught Ace's beam and made five thin stripes on the roof. In that reflection moment, Ace understood the mask: there were no eyes behind it to widen. The Choir-Master had given them up to become a better staff. The plate was their face.

"You will break what we sanctified," they said. The sentence was grief and indictment in one.

"You sanctified a mouth that eats children," Mai said. "I am short on pity."

The Choir-Master's hands lifted again, and this time they didn't lower them. Their sleeves bellied like sails catching the first wind of a storm. "It was mercy," they said, and if there had been eyes to find behind the glass they would have been wet. "It was mercy to take chaos out of a town and make it something you can sing."

"You put the chaos in the children instead," Ace said. "You put it under their skin and told their parents to call it salvation."

A crack ran across the arch, delicate as a spider spinning its first thread. Dust fell, soft as a held breath finally let go. The choir's hissing died to a fretful vibration the floor didn't love any more.

"Back out," Mai said, the tone of someone who has decided not to burn a house yet because the wind is wrong. "We don't have the wedge we need. Not all of it. We've made our point."

The Choir-Master tilted their head with balletic contempt. "You have nicked our voice. The city will still come to heel when we finish."

"Then we make it argue louder," Mai said. She had three plugs left and nowhere to seat them that would hold. She wasn't going to waste them out of anger; anger is expensive when physics is the counterparty. "And we don't finish here."

Ace's hand left the inlay. The phantom heel cup cooled under her palm. The chalk under her shirt cooled to the temperature of flesh not under threat. The diagonal in her marks settled like a blade being slid back into a sheath that had learned to accept that this was its life.

She stepped back. The choir didn't follow. The room held its breath with wounded dignity. The Choir-Master watched them with a mask that could not glower and therefore did something worse: it attended.

"We will call," they said, as the women edged to the mouth of the tunnel. "You will answer. You were carved for it. You carry the count in your ribs. Your companion will tire. She will sleep. You will hear the key in your dreams and wake with your mouth open."

Ace smiled without teeth. "You mistake me for someone who obeys when tired," she said. "You mistake her for someone who sleeps when I don't."

The choir rippled like tall grass deciding whether to be wheat. Ace and Mai backed through the throat, past the ring of poured cinder, into the drift chamber where Kosta had made gravity a little more honest for anyone who thought to chase. No one did. The choir kept humming a softened grievance. The crack in the arch sounded once like a glass of water being placed on a table and then said no more.

Kosta lifted her chin in the question that compresses a hundred others. Mai answered with a fractional shake. "We didn't burn it," she said. "Not yet. We made it listen to a different idea."

"Good," Kosta said. "My bag is down to indignation and a broken cone."

They climbed. The shaft's mouth offered the night like a deliberate mercy. Outside, the ash piles were just ash again, organized by gravity and wind. The river pretended it had never heard of hymns and washed through chains as if they were weeds.

Mai took Ace's hand, palm up. The smudge of chalk was a gray echo of her line, blurred where sweat and shirt had argued with it. The thin diagonal Ace had made in the marks underneath lay faint and stubborn. Mai kissed her fingertips once, quick, like a superstition that had found its use too late to become a ritual.

Ace huffed something like a laugh and leaned into her shoulder for one step. "You saw their face," she said, low. "No eyes."

"I'll give them a new gospel," Mai said. "We'll start with: people are not rooms."

"Write it ugly," Ace said.

"I only have one handwriting," Mai said, with that softness she had that wasn't gentleness so much as accuracy when accuracy mattered most.

The yards behind them breathed cinder and old sermons. Ahead the city glowed the way cities do when evening has made its peace with traffic and the dogs have decided the night belongs to them for an hour. Ace felt tired and particular. It was a way she liked to feel after seeing a place that would have preferred her to be general.

Her phone buzzed. Bright, of course. No apology this time; something better. A scan of old municipal plans he should not have had, with a highlighted vein leading from the Cathedral's eastern wall to a disused kiln under an abandoned bottling plant. A single line from him under the image: If you hum long enough into glass, it remembers how to shatter.

Mai read it over her shoulder and snorted. "See? He can be taught."

"We'll test him," Ace said. She looked upriver, where the ash yards sat like a sin the city had decided to live with. "Tomorrow we take the kiln. We make the room argue with itself until it cracks at the pretty parts."

"And tonight," Mai said, "we eat whatever is the opposite of ash."

"Fruit," Kosta offered. "And noodles."

"Bread," Mai said, thinking of the bakery above the choir room, the woman's wrist dusted white. "We'll buy too much on purpose. Waste is a virtue when it starves a hymn."

They headed toward lights and the human noises Ace had no desire to cure. Behind them, in the fused arch, a fissure thought about widening and did not—yet. In the circle, a phantom heel-cup waited, empty, and learned the shape of refusal for the first time. In the choir, the mask turned toward the tunnel mouth where the Vessel had stood, but did not open.

The city, hearing itself and liking it, exhaled.

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