

## Chapter 7 — The Crimson Hymn

The bottling plant crouched at the bend where the river lost all patience with walls. Its windows were cataracts of frost and dust; its sign had shed letters until it only promised BOT. Inside, kilns slept under tarps, sagging like old lungs. Racks of bottles stood in ranks: green, brown, clear—thousands of throats that had learned to hold and to break.

Bright met them at a side door with his hands visible, no pendant around his neck. “Locker,” he said, before Mai could ask. “Combination delivered to my least favorite superior in case my spine fails me.”

“Good,” Mai said. “Let’s go teach glass the wrong gospel.”

Vasiliev was already in motion, stringing cable like clever ivy. Kosta wheeled in a pallet of improvised transducers and a crate that smelled like tar and pine—pitch and cork, ugly and essential. The kiln’s brick belly yawned when they pulled the tarp: a chamber big enough to fire a cathedral’s vanity project and then some.

“We lay four,” Mai said, pacing the floor with a carpenter’s measuring eye. “Cardinal points. Two under the kiln grate, one in the flue, one on the cooling tunnel. We make the whole plant disagree with itself.”

“And the Cathedral listens,” Bright finished. He had a sheaf of maps under his arm that no one should have had. “The ash yard tunnel kisses the plant’s sub-basement here.” He tapped. “A culvert runs between like a straw, because of course it does.”

“Good,” Ace said. “We’ll make it choke.”

They worked in a rhythm the city couldn’t teach but could learn to respect. Vasiliev bolted the transducers to steel frames that hadn’t been asked to sing in thirty years. Kosta primed coils until they sweated the same field her bricks did. Mai tuned the whole ugly symphony with her ear next to the machine and her hand on Ace’s wrist, syncing her sense not to Ace’s pulse like a medic but to the mark under Ace’s sternum like a partner buying a metronome they could both afford.

When the first wrong note went through the plant, bottles hummed in their ranks like a thousand bees discovering they’d become bells. Glass fingers trembled. The kiln belly remembered fire in the worst way—phantom heat. The cooling tunnel sighed.

Far under the river, the Cathedral stiffened like a creature hearing its name mangled by children. The choir dragged breath. The Choir-Master raised those patient, terrible hands.

Ace felt the tug. It wasn’t command. It was invitation written in the script her bones had been taught to love. Come. We will finish. We will make the city clean.

Mai’s hand found her mouth without covering it, a hovering promise. “Not theirs,” she said.

“Not theirs,” Ace echoed, and the diagonal in her skin stung like agreement.

“On your word,” Bright said, but not to Mai this time. To Ace.

She lifted her hand. “Now.”

The second wrong key rode the first. The plant’s thousand throats sang refusal in twelve shades of no. Somewhere in the racks a single bottle popped with a sound like a knuckle cracking. Another hairline

at the edge of hearing. The room took it and multiplied it. Stress webbed the glass, invisible until a lamp caught one strand and made it show its work.

Beneath them the Cathedral answered with its whole chest.

The ash pillars boomed. The arch shook its thin paneled heart. The circle drank and tried to give back. The Choir-Master drew the room tight as a drumhead. Sound went from persuasion to assault. Pressure came up through the culvert, under the plant, into their boots, into their teeth.

“Hold,” Mai said, and laid a palm on the kiln brick as if it could feel shame.

Bright braced the kiln’s door with his shoulder, his teeth set in a grin he didn’t mean. Vasiliev fed the transducers power he didn’t have and asked the grid for forgiveness later. Kosta’s hands were everywhere at once, pinning cables and slamming a coil back into place with the heel of her palm. A shelf of bottles trembled, argued, then went still as if convinced by a better story.

Ace took one step toward the culvert mouths no architect had intended. The pressure recognized her and reached. She let it file her edges without opening. She listened into it the way you listen to a man who is about to lie: not for the words, but for the breath before them.

“Three,” she said.

Mai didn’t ask what he was counting. She became the count. “Four.”

“Five,” Ace said, and at five she did open—an inch, a fraction of breath. The room in her that the Order had carved in small, careful obediences eased its door. The First Voice came through with all the intimacy of a childhood illness returning under a new name. The line on her chest caught fire under skin, white-hot without heat. The bottle ranks quivered as if glad to have a leader at last.

“Look at me,” Mai said, and Ace did. The wrong key the plant sang had shape in Mai’s gaze: stubborn, inelegant, human. It wasn’t music. It was insistence. “Count with me,” Mai said, and the count that followed didn’t go one to five. It went two-four-six-eight, an even discipline that gives hammer swings places to land. It went prime numbers, awkward and proud. It went one-one-two-three-five, the messy math of living things.

Ace held the open door with one hand and wrote with the other.

She wrote refusal into the tone the way you write a name into wet concrete—crooked, urgent, unapologetic. She kept the Voice moving. She didn’t let it stand anywhere in her long enough to claim furniture. When it tried to speak through her ribs, she gave it the plant’s argument instead. When it tried to lay the city down and count, she snapped, “Get up.”

The Cathedral reeled. The Choir-Master’s hands quivered. The choir moved as one body in a dream where the stairs double under your feet. A crack that had slept across the arch since they left woke with a sound like the memory of ice, widened, and split a fused glass panel into a hundred triangles that refused to fall.

“More,” Mai said, under her breath, to the plant, to Ace, to herself.

“More,” Bright said, and put his back into the door like a penitent who has chosen the right sin at last.

The second rack of bottles gave way in a rush, a shatter like a bright green river. Vasiliev whooped, appalled and delighted. He killed one frequency, lifted another. The flue sighed a different wrongness.

Kosta barked a laugh that was mostly a cough and slapped a coil back on when it tried to toddle away.

The Cathedral doubled down.

Pressure climbed. Sound darkened until it was almost touch. The culvert became a throat that wanted to swallow the whole plant. The Choir-Master opened their masked mouth that was not a mouth, and for the first time tried to sing with a person's hunger. The Voice pressed into Ace's opened inch like a tide that will drown you not because it hates you but because that is water's nature.

Mai's hand covered Ace's mouth. Not hard. Not fear. The agreed boundary. "Bite me," she said, plain.

Ace did—not enough to break skin, but enough to feel pain as her own, not the room's. The world rearranged itself around that fact like iron filings around a magnet. The door inside her slammed with a sound only she heard and liked very much.

The arch over the Cathedral cracked again, a clear, bell-true sound that made their headlamps flutter. Stress lines ran like veins across fused glass. One pillar's bore lost its faith and became just a badly drilled hole through cheap stone. The choir's hissing disintegrated into anger, into uncertainty, into the small mammal fear that lives under every robe.

The Choir-Master stumbled. It looked wrong, to see that perfect function falter. They caught themselves on one of the bars and the bar burned their hand—not with heat, but with the simple shame of contact with a thing that had been named out loud.

"No more," Ace said, to them, to the Voice, to the child in the chalk ring she would not deny and would not serve. "You cannot have the city. You cannot have my bones. I am not a mouth."

The plant shuddered in a series of pops like a hailstorm under a tin roof. The wrong note avalanched through the bottle ranks. The criminal acoustics of the culvert coughed and coughed again and failed to clear their throat. The Cathedral, under ash, under sermons, tried to pick a key and couldn't.

"Now," Mai said, and threw a switch Vasiliev had not known she was building.

The transducers fell silent.

Not off. Silent—phase-blanked, their waves folding back on themselves, a momentary nothing that wasn't passive but precise. The plant stopped arguing with the Cathedral and refused to speak at all.

The First Voice lunged to fill the vacuum and found none. It struck a surface that did not ring. It had never learned how to love that.

Under the ash, the arch gave up. Glass went from memory to confession and fell. Not all at once—not a dramatic roar. In panels. In sheets. In polite, exhausted sighs. The pillars' bores choked on their own design. The circle's bars cracked one by one, neat as tally marks. Dust rose. The choir ducked with the slow surprise of people who forgot they had bodies.

The Choir-Master stood at the center and put one iron-bound hand over their own blank mouth. The gesture was small. It read as grief in any language. The mask split from brow to chin and opened like a book to reveal no eyes, no cheeks—only a flat plane of dark slag where a face would have required too many decisions. A last clean tone escaped like steam from a seam and died when it touched the air.

“Fall back,” Mai said, and this time no one argued with tactics. They backed to the drift chamber with the care you give to a wounded animal that has decided to stop pretending to be a god.

Kosta planted three bricks like gravestones and the pressure bowed around them and went limping elsewhere. Vasiliev killed the last power line and kissed his tablet as if it had loved him back. Bright leaned against a slag rib and covered his eyes with the heels of both hands, which had nothing of theater in it.

Ace stood and shook.

Not a tremble. A full-body, quiet convulsion, like a dog shedding water after a river. The mark under her shirt burned and cooled, burned and cooled, settling from “possession” to “scar.”

Mai’s hand was on her, everywhere it needed to be without making any part of her small. “Count,” she said softly.

“Two,” Ace said, “four,” and then she laughed because even now her lungs knew how to be contrary. “Three. Five. Done.”

“Done,” Mai said. “We’ll sweep later. We don’t stand here to get brave.”

They climbed. Above, the ash yard hadn’t moved. It had the decency not to pretend. The river rolled its shoulder and kept going. The bottling plant, exhausted by a job it had never wanted, sagged and felt better.

Behind them, under the fused arch, the Cathedral of Ash settled into something that would be described, tomorrow, in municipal memos as “a structural failure in obsolete substructures.” The First Voice didn’t die. It forgot how to be a hymn in that key. That was enough.

Bright came up last, mud to his knees, hair full of glass glitter. He looked at Ace and did not look at her chest and said, very simply, “Thank you for not letting them put me between you and the harm I helped build.”

“I’m not interested in absolving you,” Ace said, equally simple.

“I didn’t ask you to be,” Bright said, and for once the grin had no job to do at all. —

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