

Chapter 3 - The Dissonant Messenger

By noon the city had learned a new bad habit: screens blinked when they tried to admire you. The public glitch from the hub bled outward along transit lines and café wi-fi like dye, and everywhere Ace and Mai walked they found the small, stubborn signatures of their work—a crooked square chalked at ankle level on a bank's marble plinth; a diagonal tooth added to a bus stop ad with a fingertip and grime; a teenager in a hoodie filming a jittering makeup filter and cackling like he had won a private war.

The Foundation learned fast too. Two separation drones shadowed them to the old market, unmarked but neat, hovering at a lawful height like polite threats. Mai ignored them until ignoring stopped being useful.

"Power signatures are municipal," she said, watching their shadows on the wet stone. "Optics aren't. They're piggybacking third-party calibration arrays. Prototype hardware." She kept her voice casual; the drones would be listening for fear, or at least regularity. "We're five minutes from the rendezvous. Let them have five."

Ace rolled her shoulders as they slipped under the cracked portico of a shuttered flower stall. Her katanas stayed sheathed—there were too many cameras and not enough reasons. She didn't have to draw to take up more space. Shadows drew themselves around her when she wanted, thickening like smoke that had misplaced the fire. Violet stayed quiet, a coil of thought snug against the base of her skull, as if the voice were content to feel the pressure of the coming turn without demanding it.

Bright's breadcrumb had been simple: a location, a time, and a strip of nonsense text that resolved into coordinates if you counted wrong. The old market was mostly a memory now—stone arches, rain glossing over carved dates, a line of pigeons hunched on a wire like tired notes. At the center, under a bronze statue of a merchant who had never once smiled for anyone poor, a bakery kiosk had opened for the lunch crowd. The scent of yeast and heat cut through the rain.

Mai stopped just short of the queue, eyes narrowing at the chalkwork on the kiosk's side panel. Someone had drawn the square there—small enough that a clerk wouldn't notice—diagonal crossing a fraction low, a tiny tooth not at the base but mid-line, like a key that had been filed wrong on purpose.

"Marker," she said.

Ace's smirk tilted. "Subtle."

"Subtle is how you outlive the Foundation," Mai said, and paid for a loaf that arrived wrapped in paper and trust.

They walked away without hurry, across the square and into the arcade where a line of closed shops watched themselves rot in dim glass. The drones muttered overhead and then kept a respectable distance as if the law had told them to keep their hands in their pockets.

Mai set the loaf on a bench with peeling green paint and cracked the crust with her thumbs. The bread split along a seam that hadn't been baked so much as suggested. Inside, between two sheets of wax paper kept dry by a logic that didn't belong to the weather, lay a message.

No greeting. No signature. No Foundation header to strip. Handwritten, precise—print letters so careful they felt like they wanted to be music.

YOU'RE MAKING THE RIGHT KIND OF NOISE. KEEP IT LOUD. THE FIRST VOICE IS NOT A

METAPHOR. IT IS HUNTING A CORRIDOR TO VESSEL FORM VIA THREAD → CLOUD → CHOIR. YOU KNOW WHAT IT WANTS. DON'T LET IT USE YOU TO FIND ITSELF.

Mai read it twice, then slid the top sheet aside. The second was a map that was not a map—lines and circles that looked like someone had tried to teach a subway diagram to pray. Three circles were numbered in small, unloving digits: 2, 7, 4. The 7 sat over the river's north bank. A narrow arrow pointed underground.

Beneath the paper lay a small metal object, dull and pitted, like it had been in a pocket that also had teeth. A key. Not to a door, not really—a fragment of a key: flat, sigil-thin, stamped with the crooked square and a diagonal that had been broken off at the tooth. It would never turn anything physical. It looked like it was meant to be held against a surface and remembered.

Ace lifted it between forefinger and thumb. The metal had the weight of old decisions. Violet hummed once, approving—like a cat that recognizes a companion animal.

“Lux,” Ace said.

Mai didn't ask how she knew. The hand that had written those letters lived in the interval between ritual and control. Lux had loved both, once. The bakery mark was their humor. The broken tooth their confession.

“Cameo only,” Mai said softly, a promise to the air. “If they're smart.”

The drones decided it was time to be more useful. One slid lower through the arcade's mouth, casting a tight grid of light over the benches as if measuring the distance between stains could make them clean. The other hung back near the kiosk, watching the line and the chalk and the clerk's bored, chipped thumbnail.

Mai didn't look up. She slid the map and the note back into the loaf and re-wrapped it in a way that would make a surveillance review look like an uninteresting lunch. The key she palmed. “We need a quiet minute.”

Ace gave her one. She stood at the arcade's entrance and considered the drone until it remembered a different job and moved two meters to the left. It still watched. It couldn't help that any more than the pigeons could help being ugly.

Mai held the key against the chalk line drawn on the kiosk in the map—their map, not the bakery's. The diagonal on the wall of their apartment had begun to glow the night before without permission. This fragment had that same almost-heat. She pressed the broken tooth to her tablet's edge where the runes cut the metal.

The screen stuttered. A new layer of interface oiled up through her code—unwelcome and elegant—trying to anticipate what she wanted and offer it before she could ask. She let it, for a second. The layer smoothed itself into a line that connected the numbered circles from the note, dotted with subsidiary points riding the river's underside.

“It's a path,” she said. “Thread to cloud to choir. Not just metaphor. Actual nodes. And here—” she jabbed at the 7 with a knuckle “—someone built a chapel to servers and called it a substation.”

“A Chorus Nexus,” Ace said without inflection.

Mai glanced at her. “That's not a name I've put in your head.”

"It came with the knives," Ace said. It didn't need to make sense; too much of her life already had.

The radio in Mai's bag coughed up static, then resolved into a voice that used to make her smile in spite of herself. Bright sounded like he'd been awake for two days and had learned something he wasn't allowed to keep. "Don't thank me," the voice said, not bothering with preamble. "Don't answer either. This line's wrong. The drones are not just watching—they're scoring. If you see a van with the word *Maintenance* misspelled, go another way. The river node goes live at dusk."

The message clicked off without another word. Mai stared at the radio as if it had failed to argue back in the right key.

"Bright's hovering," she said.

"Let him," Ace said. "We're not."

They ate some of the bread because that's what you do when the world lays a trap in food; you make it ordinary with your teeth. The drones retreated a little, content to watch their prey ruin its own appetites.

They took the long way to the north bank: alleys that had forgotten their official names, a parking deck where the Foundation had washed blood off the concrete after a training exercise eight years ago, a narrow lane strung with laundry that had decided rain was just more water. Twice, Ace felt the pull—Violet's palm against the inside of her hand, pressure and invitation. She pushed it off with a breath and a wrong count under her tongue.

3, 7, 4. The city either didn't listen or didn't know how.

The substation should have been city-issue anonymous, but someone had loved its corners too much. New brick too clean against old. A mural painted over and painted over again until the ghosts of the first shapes grinned under the latest coat. Cameras at the corners like stitched dimples. A plaque by the service entrance praising an initiative to modernize.

Mai frowned at the access pad. It wanted a contractor's NFC badge and the pleasure of believing in standards. "You didn't bring lockpicks," Ace observed, dry.

"I brought something better." Mai held up the fractured key, then the tablet. She pressed the key against the pad and hummed, low and off-pitch, like a bad singer trying to ruin a hymn on purpose.

The pad blinked, considered, and decided to admire her.

The door clicked.

Inside smelled like dust and ozone and the memory of successful tests. Banks of equipment lined the walls, militarily neat. A row of server racks purred like a dark choir. No guards. The guards were in the drones. Why pay a salary when you can train a grid to love you?

Mai set her device down and went to work. Ace walked the aisles by instinct, watching heat shimmer where it shouldn't, counting to herself in numbers that never made patterns. The server room tolerated them because it didn't know what to do when someone refused to fit along an axis.

"Two minutes," Mai said. "The map Lux—" she didn't love the name, so she swallowed it—"provided is a skeleton key, but it's brittle. If I push too hard, I trip their calibration cascade and we'll both wake up corrected."

“Hard no,” Ace said. She put herself between Mai and the racks because putting herself between Mai and anything dangerous had become her favorite way to rebel against every god she’d been offered.

Mai slid her code into the grid like a knife under old paint. The mesh blossomed—noise applied at reflection points, little insults to predictive models. Mirror functions throttled themselves rather than admit confusion. Live camera feeds forgot who they were trying to flatter. Above them, faint and distant, a billboard coughed.

The server room responded with a sound like a sucked tooth.

A speaker crackled. A familiar voice unrolled into the space, soft as the inside of hospital tape.

“Your burst today was vulgar,” Clean Hands said. “But instructive. You keep showing me where to set the iron.”

Ace’s head lifted. The gloved hands did not appear—the Nexus had not learned presentation yet—but the warmth in the voice threatened to starve them.

“You’re not welcome,” Ace said to the room. “In case that was unclear earlier.”

“I don’t require welcome to perform care,” Clean Hands replied. “You can’t imagine what the world is like when everybody stops pretending they want to be erratic. The noise quiets. The knives sleep. Mothers exhale.”

Mai routed the audio through her app so the microphone ate its own reflection and choked. “If you cared,” she said, “you’d stop counting people.”

“Counting saves lives,” the voice said mildly. “Even numbers fit better.”

“Your even numbers killed a man on the metro,” Ace snapped. “He waited for your permission to move and didn’t get it. He’s bones and a report now.”

A small pause, genuine or perfectly simulated. “Some correction hurts,” Clean Hands said. “It can’t be helped.”

Mai’s hands moved faster, fingers finding the places where her mesh could bite without waking the room’s immune system. She had to lean closer to read a line of tiny diagnostics; the rack’s glass threw a ghost of her face back at her with half a frame of lag. The lag would be enough. “Keep her talking,” she said.

Ace stepped where she knew the cameras would weigh her most—the center aisle, haloed by cold light. She rolled her sleeve to show the chalk-thin diagonal on her wrist, ugly and deliberate. “Do you see this?” she asked. “It’s a scar. It doesn’t line up. It will never line up. It’s mine. I like it.”

Silence filled the speaker. Not confusion—calculation.

“Bring her,” Clean Hands said then, almost kindly. “Bring *Mai.* We’ll iron her careful first. She’s so good at following rules—she’ll make you soft where you are knife.”

Violet rose, delighted. The laugh tasted like cut limes and old blood. *Let me.*

Mai beat her to it. “No,” she said flatly, and stabbed the last command into the aggregator. “You don’t get to talk about me.”

The server room's climate control hiccupped. The mesh pulsed, then held like a bad chord stuck in a pipe organ. Outside, faintly, another billboard's colors collapsed into a smear that would make a creative director cry.

Clean Hands' voice thinned to a filament. "We'll isolate you," she promised. "If you won't be measured together, you'll be separated until you learn."

"Try," Ace said, and meant it.

The pad by the door flashed an offended red, then died. The drones outside pinged, confused, their depth sensors chewing on a pattern that didn't admit squares. A breaker tripped itself somewhere it wasn't supposed to. A fluorescent tube flickered and went out, a cheap star dying with a little theatricality.

Mai unplugged, gathered, and pressed the fractured key back into her palm like a vow. "We have what we need," she said. "We can map the corridor. The river node isn't the last, but it's the first one built like a cathedral."

Ace's mouth quirked. "An ugly service, then."

They stepped back into afternoon that had decided not to be bright. The drones had multiplied to three and adopted the offended posture of small authorities whose signatures had failed.

The message arrived as they crossed the service yard: a single ping on Mai's side-channel, signed in a key Lux would only have if they were very sure of dying soon or surviving long enough to be forgiven.

DON'T COME LOOKING FOR ME. IF THEY FIND ME, THEY'LL USE ME AS A CHOIR TUNER. IF YOU FIND ME, YOU'LL TRY TO SAVE ME. THAT WILL BE HOW THEY GET YOU. THE NEXUS BENEATH THE RIVER HAS AN ALTAR FOR A VOICE. THAT ALTAR KNOWS YOUR NAME. I'M SORRY I LOVED THE WRONG KIND OF ORDER. I'M SORRY I TAUGHT IT YOUR SHAPE.

The text ended with a count that refused to settle into a pattern: **3, 7, 4, 9, 2**—then stopped, as if someone had taken the pen away.

Mai read it twice, without changing expression. Then she deleted it without fanfare. "Cameo concluded," she said.

Ace watched the drones edge closer, as if they could smell grief the way wolves smell salt. "We keep them to a cameo too," she said, and meant Lux and Clean Hands and every old faith that wanted their backs.

They moved fast, then faster, shoulders touching out of habit more than fear. The city lifted its head to watch them go. A kid on a bike skidded past and whooped at the sound of his brakes because making noise was still allowed. Someone had drawn a crooked square at the bottom of the substation door while they were inside. It would wash off. It would stay there in ghost chalk until rain forgot.

As they reached the street, Mai slipped the fractured key into Ace's palm and closed her fingers over it. "If you open," she said, very quiet, "you open for me."

Ace nodded. The metal warmed against her skin like a promise or a fever.

Violet leaned close in her mind—a whisper against the rim of the ear. *Little blade. There will be singing.*

“Then we sing wrong,” Ace said, and Mai smiled like she wanted to frame the answer and hang it crooked.

By dusk the river would be dark glass and the Chapel of Servers would hum a hymn through its ribs. Between now and then they would seed more noise, fix more mirrors to lie badly, teach more strangers to count in ways that turned locks. Lux had sent a map and an apology and the shape of a trap; Clean Hands had offered a cure that sounded like sleep; the Foundation had sent its flying clerks with tape measures.

Ace and Mai walked toward the water with a broken key and a working one drawn into their skin. The city, imperfect and awake, came with them as far as the curb and then waited, listening to see if the chorus would break. It would. It already was. —

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