

Interlude — Bright's Homemade Wine

The Foundation safehouse was unusually quiet.

No alarms.

No radio chatter.

No hurried footsteps in the corridors.

Just rain tapping steadily against the window... and a wooden crate sitting on the kitchen table with a note taped to the side.

Mai stopped beside the table, read the note once, then again, and sighed so deeply it already sounded like regret.

"I don't like this."

Ace sat in a chair turned halfway backwards, arms resting on the backrest, eyes on the crate. His expression barely changed, but the slight tilt of his head said enough.

"We haven't even opened it yet."

"That's exactly why."

Shammy stood on the other side of the table, leaning forward over the crate with the curiosity of someone studying a new weather pattern rather than a gift from Dr. Bright. Her silver hair crackled faintly with static.

She read the note out loud.

"For the Triad. Homemade. — Bright."

Then she looked up.

"Humans give fermented drinks as gifts."

Mai turned to her.

"Bright isn't 'humans.' Bright is Bright."

Ace nodded once.

"That's an important distinction."

Shammy lifted the lid.

Inside the crate were three dark glass bottles. No labels. No vintage. No producer. Nothing remotely comforting.

The red liquid moved slowly inside the glass as Shammy held one bottle toward the light.

"...it looks like wine," Ace said.

Mai narrowed her eyes.

“Bright doesn’t make wine.”

Ace shrugged.

“Bright makes everything. The problem is that nothing Bright makes stays in the form it was supposed to.”

Shammy tilted her head.

“Should we test it?”

Mai rubbed her forehead and stared at the bottles as if expecting them to start screaming, exploding, or reciting containment procedures.

“...one bottle.”

Ace raised an eyebrow.

“There speaks a woman who is absolutely going to regret this decision.”

“Probably,” Mai muttered. “But since the crate is already here, and if we don’t open it Bright will show up tomorrow asking every thirty minutes what we thought of his ‘creative fermentation process’...”

Shammy handed her the bottle.

“Then we open it.”

Mai stared at the bottle for a moment, then pulled the cork.

The cork came free with a surprisingly civilized *pop*.

All three of them froze.

No toxic vapor.

No anomalous reaction.

No blood, fire, or curses.

Ace cautiously sniffed the air.

“...that actually smells like wine.”

Shammy inhaled deeply and brightened instantly.

“Ooh.”

Mai poured three glasses.

“If we die from this, I’m haunting Bright personally.”

Ace took his glass.

“Fair.”

They tasted it.

Mai froze first.

"...wait."

Ace glanced at her.

"Good 'wait' or Foundation internal investigation 'wait'?"

Mai took another sip.

"...good."

Shammy drank hers almost in a single gulp, then blinked at the empty glass like it had vanished on its own.

Ace stared at her.

"Shammy."

She looked back.

"Yes?"

"You're not usually supposed to drink wine like that."

Shammy thought about it.

"It was efficient."

Mai snorted.

"It's wine, not a fuel station."

Shammy held out her glass immediately.

"I can adapt."

Ace started laughing quietly despite himself.

Mai noticed immediately.

"Ah," she said. "Now this is officially a bad idea."

"Probably," Ace admitted.

They poured the second glasses.

Outside the rain continued steadily. The safehouse kitchen felt warm and softly lit, and somewhere between the first and second glass the evening developed that slight tilt where you know absolutely nothing responsible will happen from this point forward.

Shammy moved to sit cross-legged on the floor beside the table, holding her glass in both hands while watching the other two.

“Humans often combine alcohol and games.”

Mai sighed instantly.

“No.”

Shammy turned to her.

“What game?”

Ace slowly rotated his empty glass between his fingers.

“Don’t tell her.”

Mai glanced at the empty bottle lying on the table.

“...there is one.”

Shammy brightened immediately.

“Yes?”

Mai pointed at the bottle.

“A game called *spin the bottle*.”

Shammy blinked.

“Bottle spinning.”

Ace sighed.

“Bad idea.”

Shammy smiled widely.

“Excellent idea.”

“You don’t know the rules yet,” Mai said.

“That has never stopped me before.”

Ace covered his eyes briefly.

“Yeah. That’s exactly the problem.”

Mai spun the bottle experimentally.

It whirred across the wooden surface and stopped quickly.

“It spins. When it stops pointing at someone, they get a task.”

“What kind of task?”

Ace shrugged.

"Depends on the people. Sometimes a question. Sometimes a kiss. Sometimes something stupid."

Shammy tilted her head.

"...humans made a game that becomes kissing."

Mai glanced at her.

"Usually."

Shammy considered that for a moment.

Then her grin became even more dangerous.

"This is the best human ritual I have heard of."

Ace glanced at Mai.

"We can still back out."

Mai spun the bottle again.

"No one backs out at this point."

The first round was harmless.

At least in theory.

The bottle spun, slowed, wobbled slightly... and stopped.

Pointing directly at Ace.

Shammy leaned across the table immediately.

"Well then," Mai said. "Simple start. A kiss."

Ace looked at the bottle.

Then at them.

Then at his glass.

"...of course."

Shammy was already halfway over the table. She pressed a quick light kiss to Ace's lips, pulled back a centimeter, tilted her head—and kissed him again, just a little longer.

Then she sat back down and announced proudly:

"Human ritual confirmed."

Mai burst out laughing.

Ace stared at Shammy for a moment, faint warmth touching his cheeks, then took a long drink.

“This game is rigged,” he muttered.

“Not yet,” Mai said. “But the night is young.”

Somewhere around the third bottle the game lost all structure.

The bottle still spun occasionally, but tasks slowly turned into things like:

“Sit closer.”

“No, closer than that.”

“You cheated with the wind again.”

“Wait, I wasn’t finished.”

Shammy absolutely used airflow at least twice.

Possibly three times.

Mai caught her once when the bottle made a completely impossible reverse spin.

“Shammy.”

“What?”

“Don’t pretend.”

“I am not pretending.”

“The bottle just performed a meteorologically impossible maneuver.”

Shammy thought about it.

“...experimental turbulence.”

Ace leaned back laughing.

“Write that down. The Foundation just got a new term.”

Eventually Shammy stretched out on the sofa, Ace sitting on the floor in front of it so she could lean against his shoulder. Mai settled beside them—or between them. The exact geometry stopped mattering.

Shammy idly twirled a strand of Mai’s silver hair between her fingers.

“Human drinking rituals are excellent.”

“They usually involve less atmospheric manipulation,” Mai said.

Shammy glanced at her.

“That sounds like a design flaw.”

Ace looked up at both of them.

"...depends on the company."

Mai leaned back, one hand resting on the back of Ace's neck without really thinking about it.

Shammy noticed immediately. Shammy noticed everything.

She rested her chin lightly on Mai's shoulder.

"I understand this game now."

Ace tilted his head.

"Do you."

"Spin the bottle is just an elaborate excuse."

Mai smiled lazily.

"For what?"

Shammy looked at both of them.

"To do what you already want."

A quiet moment followed.

Not awkward. Just warm.

Ace snorted softly.

"...fair analysis."

Mai stood slowly.

"In my opinion," she said calmly, "we should move this conversation to the bedroom."

Shammy brightened immediately.

"That is an excellent continuation of the game."

Ace stood up more slowly.

"We are going to have a hangover tomorrow."

Mai turned to him.

"That's tomorrow's problem."

Shammy took Ace's hand and pulled him along.

"Then let tomorrow suffer."

The kitchen lights stayed on.

The empty bottles stayed on the table.

The bottle that started everything spun faintly once more when someone brushed it.

The bedroom door closed.

And to the reader's loud disappointment...

That was where the night ended.

The Next Morning

Mai woke first to the sun trying to murder her personally through the curtains.

She opened one eye.

Closed it again immediately.

"Ah, hell."

Ace's voice came from under the blanket

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"I don't like this."

Ace sat in a chair turned halfway backwards, her arms resting on the backrest, violet eyes fixed on the crate. Her expression barely changed, but the slight tilt of her head said enough.

"We haven't even opened it yet."

"That's exactly why."

Shammy stood on the other side of the table, leaning forward over the crate with the curiosity of someone examining a new atmospheric phenomenon rather than a gift from Dr. Bright. Faint static crackled in her silver hair.

She read the note aloud.

"For the Triad. Homemade. — Bright."

Then she looked up.

"Humans give fermented drinks as gifts."

Mai turned toward her.

"Bright isn't 'humans.' Bright is Bright."

Ace nodded once.

"That's an important distinction."

Shammy lifted the lid.

Inside the crate were three dark glass bottles.

No labels.

No vintage.

No brand.

Nothing remotely reassuring.

The red liquid shifted slowly inside the glass as Shammy held one bottle toward the light.

"...it looks like wine," Ace said.

Mai narrowed her eyes.

"Bright doesn't make wine."

Ace shrugged lightly.

"Bright makes everything. The problem is that nothing Bright makes stays in the form it was supposed to."

Shammy tilted her head.

"Should we test it?"

Mai rubbed her forehead and stared at the bottles as if expecting them to start screaming, exploding, or reciting containment procedures.

"...one bottle."

Ace raised an eyebrow.

"There speaks a woman who is definitely going to regret that decision."

"Probably," Mai muttered. "But since the crate is already here—and if we don't open it, Bright will show up tomorrow asking every thirty minutes what we thought about his 'creative fermentation process'..."

Shammy handed her the bottle.

“Then we open it.”

Mai stared at the bottle for a moment.

Then she pulled the cork.

Pop.

All three of them froze.

No vapor.

No anomalous reaction.

No blood, fire, or eldritch chanting.

Ace cautiously sniffed the air.

“...that actually smells like wine.”

Shammy inhaled deeply and brightened immediately.

“Ooh.”

Mai poured three glasses.

“If we die from this, I’m haunting Bright personally.”

Ace took her glass.

“Fair.”

They tasted it.

Mai froze first.

“...wait.”

Ace glanced at her.

“Good ‘wait’ or Foundation disciplinary hearing ‘wait’?”

Mai took another sip.

“...good.”

Shammy drank hers almost in one go.

Then she blinked at the empty glass as if it had vanished unexpectedly.

Ace stared at her.

“Shammy.”

Shammy looked up.

“Yes?”

“You’re not usually supposed to drink wine like that.”

Shammy considered this carefully.

“It was efficient.”

Mai snorted.

“It’s wine, not a refueling station.”

Shammy immediately held out her glass.

“I can adapt.”

Ace started laughing quietly despite herself.

Mai noticed instantly.

“Ah,” she said. “Now this is officially a bad idea.”

“Probably,” Ace admitted.

They poured the second glasses.

Outside the rain continued its steady rhythm. The kitchen felt warm, the lights soft, and somewhere between the first and second glass the evening tilted slightly—the way evenings do when sensible decisions quietly leave the building.

Shammy moved to sit cross-legged on the floor beside the table, holding her glass in both hands.

“Humans often combine alcohol and games.”

Mai sighed instantly.

“No.”

Shammy looked at her.

“What game?”

Ace rotated her empty glass slowly between her fingers.

“Don’t tell her.”

Mai glanced at the empty bottle lying on the table.

“...there is one.”

Shammy brightened immediately.

“Yes?”

Mai pointed at the bottle.

“A game called spin the bottle.”

Shammy blinked.

“Bottle spinning.”

Ace sighed.

“Bad idea.”

Shammy smiled broadly.

“Excellent idea.”

“You don’t know the rules yet,” Mai said.

“That has never stopped me before.”

Ace covered her eyes briefly.

“Yeah. That’s exactly the problem.”

Mai spun the bottle.

It whirred across the wooden table and stopped quickly.

“When it stops pointing at someone,” she said, “they get a task.”

“What kind of task?”

Ace shrugged.

“Depends. Sometimes a question. Sometimes a kiss. Sometimes something stupid.”

Shammy tilted her head.

“...humans created a game that becomes kissing.”

Mai glanced at her.

“Usually.”

Shammy thought about that for a moment.

Then her grin widened dangerously.

“This is the best human ritual I have heard of.”

Ace looked at Mai.

“We can still stop.”

Mai spun the bottle again.

"No one stops now."

The bottle spun again.

This time it circled longer, wobbling slightly as it slowed... then stopped.

Pointing directly at Ace.

Shammy leaned forward immediately.

"Well then," Mai said. "Simple start. A kiss."

Ace looked at the bottle.

Then at the two of them.

Then at her glass.

"...of course."

Shammy was already halfway across the table. She leaned in and pressed a quick, light kiss against Ace's lips.

Then she pulled back a centimeter, tilted her head slightly...

...and kissed her again, a little longer this time.

When Shammy finally leaned back, she announced with quiet satisfaction,

"Human ritual confirmed."

Mai burst out laughing.

Ace stared at Shammy for a moment, faint warmth touching her cheeks before she covered it by taking another drink.

"This game is rigged."

"Not yet," Mai said. "But give it time."

Somewhere around the third bottle the game stopped pretending to follow rules.

The bottle still spun occasionally, but the tasks became less structured.

"Sit closer."

"No, closer than that."

"You cheated with the wind again."

"I did not cheat."

"Shammy."

"Yes?"

“The bottle just made a meteorologically impossible movement.”

Shammy considered this calmly.

“...experimental turbulence.”

Ace laughed quietly.

“Write that down. The Foundation just invented a new term.”

Eventually Shammy stretched out on the sofa.

Ace ended up sitting on the floor in front of it so Shammy could lean comfortably against her shoulder. Mai drifted down beside them—or between them. The exact geometry stopped mattering somewhere around the second bottle.

Shammy idly twisted a strand of Mai’s silver hair between her fingers.

“Human drinking rituals are excellent.”

“They usually involve less atmospheric manipulation,” Mai said.

Shammy glanced at her.

“That sounds like a design flaw.”

Ace looked up at them both.

“...depends on the company.”

Mai leaned back, resting one hand loosely at the back of Ace’s neck without really thinking about it.

Shammy noticed immediately.

Shammy noticed everything.

She rested her chin lightly on Mai’s shoulder.

“I understand this game now.”

Ace tilted her head slightly.

“Oh?”

“Spin the bottle is just an elaborate excuse.”

Mai smiled lazily.

“For what?”

Shammy looked between them.

“To do what you already want.”

A quiet moment followed.

Not awkward.

Just warm.

Ace snorted softly.

"...fair analysis."

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"In my opinion," she said calmly, "we should move this conversation to the bedroom."

Shammy brightened instantly.

"That is an excellent continuation of the game."

Ace pushed herself up more slowly.

"We are going to regret this tomorrow."

Mai turned toward her.

"That's tomorrow's problem."

Shammy took Ace's hand and pulled her along.

"Then let tomorrow suffer."

The kitchen lights stayed on.

The empty bottles stayed on the table.

The bottle that had started everything spun once more when someone brushed it on the way past.

The bedroom door closed.

And—to the reader's loud disappointment—

That was where the night ended.

The Next Morning

Mai woke first.

Sunlight was stabbing through the curtains with the personal determination of a murder attempt.

She opened one eye.

Closed it again immediately.

"Ah... hell."

From somewhere inside the blankets Ace muttered,

"...don't talk that loud."

Shammy was already awake, sitting at the edge of the bed, hair slightly tangled but otherwise perfectly alert. Tiny sparks of static flickered quietly around her.

“Good morning.”

Ace pulled the pillow tighter over her face.

“No.”

Mai slowly pushed herself upright.

Her head throbbed.

At the same time her body felt oddly warm and relaxed, which made the entire situation deeply suspicious.

“I’m getting coffee,” she muttered.

Ace made a noise that might have been gratitude or suffering.

Mai shuffled toward the kitchen.

The kitchen looked exactly like a kitchen after a bad idea involving wine.

Empty bottles.

A crooked glass.

A bowl she didn’t remember existing.

And a folded note on the table.

Mai stared at it.

“...no.”

She opened it.

Side effects may include:

mild euphoria, reduced inhibition, and poor decision making.

Hangover recovery kit included.

You’re welcome.

— Bright

Mai closed her eyes.

“...of course.”

Ace shuffled into the kitchen a moment later looking like someone who had lost a fight with gravity.

“Don’t say anything.”

Mai handed her the note.

Ace read it, sighed deeply, and leaned against the counter.

"...Bright."

Shammy appeared behind them.

"Recovery kit?"

Mai followed the direction indicated by the note and spotted a metal can sitting on the counter.

Round.

Bulging slightly.

She lifted it.

Read the label.

"...what the hell is surströmming."

Ace straightened immediately.

"...do not open that."

Shammy tilted her head.

"Food?"

Ace raised a hand weakly.

"Shammy. Please. Don't. You're supposed to open that underwater or preferably in another country or possibly in space—"

Click.

Mai had already opened the lid.

The smell hit the kitchen like a physical attack.

Shammy blinked.

"...OH."

Ace managed to say only,

"...I warned—"

Then her expression collapsed into horror.

"No."

She turned immediately.

“No no no—”

And sprinted for the bathroom.

A second later the apartment echoed with a sound every Finnish person recognizes instantly.

“UURGH—”

Mai pinched her nose.

“Good lord.”

Shammy stared into the open can.

“...this smells like a dying Baltic Sea.”

From the bathroom came another miserable noise.

“DON'T—UURGH—TOUCH—THAT—”

Mai shouted back through her fingers,

“A LITTLE LATE!”

Shammy leaned closer.

“It is fish.”

Ace's voice from the bathroom:

“IT IS NOT WORTH IT!”

Shammy picked up a fork.

Mai stared at her.

“Don't.”

“Why?”

“Because that smells like the Baltic Sea died twice.”

Shammy considered this.

“...still fish.”

She lifted a small piece and cautiously tasted it.

Mai watched her like she was witnessing a violation of natural law.

Shammy chewed.

Once.

Twice.

Then swallowed.

Silence.

"Well?" Mai asked.

Shammy tilted her head.

"...salty."

"Shammy."

"Yes?"

"You cannot describe that as just 'salty.'"

She thought again.

"Very salty."

From the bathroom came a weak, miserable laugh.

Shammy touched her temple.

Paused.

Tilted her head the other way.

"Interesting."

Mai narrowed her eyes.

"What."

"Head pressure decreasing."

"...what."

"Hangover symptoms decreasing."

The kitchen fell silent.

From the bathroom Ace groaned from somewhere near the floor.

"I'm dying."

Shammy took another bite.

"Confirmed."

Mai looked at the can.

Then at Shammy.

Then back at the can.

"...no way."

She grabbed the fork.

Sniffed it.

Made a face so intense it deserved an award.

"Perkele."

Shammy blinked.

"What does that mean?"

Mai pointed at the can.

"Approximately this."

Then she ate.

Slowly.

Suspiciously.

"Good grief that smell."

Then she stopped.

"...wait."

Ace staggered out of the bathroom looking pale enough to haunt a lighthouse.

"You are not actually eating that."

Mai rubbed her temple.

"...hangover's easing."

Ace stared at her.

Then at Shammy.

Then at the can.

"...no."

Shammy held out the fork.

"Try."

"No."

Mai smirked.

"Coward."

"That smells like a biological weapon."

"But it works."

"I don't believe you."

Shammy opened the fridge.

"Traditional serving method?"

Mai frowned.

"What?"

Shammy pulled out crispbread, butter, onion, and boiled potatoes.

Under them lay another note.

She read it aloud.

Traditional Scandinavian serving method recommended.

Try not to cry.

— Bright

Ace closed her eyes.

"...I hate him."

"We all do," Mai said.

Shammy calmly assembled the sandwich.

Crispbread.

Butter.

Potato.

Fish.

Onion.

Ace watched like someone observing culinary war crimes.

"Don't do that."

Shammy held it up.

"Balanced structure."

"Shammy."

"Yes?"

“That is the apocalypse on bread.”

Mai leaned against the counter trying not to laugh.

Shammy took a bite.

Chewed.

Paused.

Mai and Ace stared.

Shammy swallowed.

“...this is actually very good.”

Mai blinked.

“...what.”

Ace stared at the ceiling.

“That is impossible.”

Shammy nodded.

“Complex. Salty. Strong. Efficient.”

Mai grabbed the crispbread.

“Give that here.”

“Traitor,” Ace muttered.

Mai built her own smaller version and bit into it.

She winced.

Then froze.

“Perkele.”

Ace pointed.

“Good perkele or bad perkele?”

Mai swallowed slowly.

“...good.”

Ace stared at them.

Then at the can.

Then back.

Her internal struggle was almost visible.

“No.”

Shammy offered another crispbread.

“Try.”

“No.”

Mai raised an eyebrow.

“Your hangover says otherwise.”

Ace stared at both of them.

Then took the crispbread.

Sniffed it.

Went pale again.

“If I die from this I’m haunting Bright.”

“I’ll schedule the appointment,” Mai said.

Ace took a bite.

Chewed.

Stopped.

Stared into the distance.

Silence.

“Well?” Shammy asked.

Ace swallowed slowly.

“...this works for hangovers.”

Mai lifted her coffee mug triumphantly.

“Told you.”

Ace glared at the can with deeply personal hatred.

“...but I hate Bright even more now.”

“That’s a healthy response,” Mai said.

Shammy nodded approvingly.

“Very healthy.”

Mai picked up Bright's note again.

Read it.

Looked at the can.

Looked at the two of them.

Then smiled slowly.

Very calmly.

She placed the note on the table.

And said in a perfectly even voice:

"Jack Bright, you are a dead man."

Shammy nodded immediately.

"Very dead."

Ace sat down heavily and rubbed her face.

"...if he brings us more of this I'm changing jobs."

"The Foundation will not let you leave that easily," Mai said.

"I know."

Shammy took another satisfied bite.

"I think Bright was trying to help."

Mai looked at her for a long moment.

"I'm sure he believed that."

"Did he succeed?"

Mai looked around the kitchen.

The empty bottles.

The surströmming can.

Ace—who had just vomited and was now eating fermented fish against all human dignity.

Then she sighed.

"...unfortunately yes."

Ace raised a finger.

"But that does not save him."

"Of course not," Mai said.

Appendix A — Unofficial Internal Note

Foundation Internal Incident Report

Author: Dr. Jack Bright

Status: Unofficial / Please do not show Dr. Gears

Subject: Triad / Homemade Wine / Recovery Kit / Surströmming Event

Summary:

Successfully delivered three bottles of experimental homemade wine and a Scandinavian hangover recovery solution to the Triad.

Results were technically positive.

Operational reception was... mixed.

Observations:

Wine accepted.

Hangover confirmed.

Recovery kit effective.

Opening protocol ignored.

Ace vomited.

Mai threatened to kill me.

Shammy appeared unexpectedly enthusiastic.

I may have made a tactical mistake.

Conclusion:

Experiment technically successful.

Social consequences remain under evaluation.

Recommendation:

Avoid the Triad for at least 72 hours.

Possibly a week.

Possibly a month.

—

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Contact: editor at publication-x.com

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