

Chapter 7 - Glass Breathing

The rear approach to the wellness complex was quieter than it had any right to be.

That was the first bad sign.

The second was the landscaping.

Nothing grows that neatly in a northern city unless somebody paid for it, tested it, and threatened it with replacement if it embarrassed the investors. Moss terraces climbed toward the green roof in shallow steps, rainwater guided through channels too precise to look natural. Even the service lane curves had been softened, as if utility itself needed brand management.

The building did not want to appear dangerous.

Those were always the dangerous ones.

Ace and Mai stayed close to the concrete wall of the adjacent parking structure until the main service yard came into view. Two loading bays. One waste compactor. One electric maintenance cart left charging under a weather shelter. Three cameras visible, which meant at least six more hidden. No human guards.

"Either they're confident," Ace murmured, "or they're trying not to spook the prey."

Mai crouched behind a row of chilled air units and scanned the yard. "Both."

Her tablet rendered the visible architecture, then the invisible one beneath it: sensor sweeps from the roofline, thermal checks from the loading dock, a reflection-mapping system piggybacked onto the atrium glass that reached farther than the eye could guess.

"It's layered," she said. "Municipal feeds in the outer ring. Corporate security inside that. Cantor overlay on top."

"And below?"

Mai looked toward the foundation line of the building as if she could see through several stories of concrete. "Something old enough to call itself infrastructure and new enough to lie about it."

"Choir lungs."

"Most likely."

Bright's route pulsed again on the side-channel, ugly and efficient. Not through the front. Not through the main service door. Around the east utility fence, past a drainage corridor, to a maintenance access tucked half under the atrium's outer support frame.

A coward's entrance.

Perfect.

The first drone appeared above the yard as if summoned by the thought. It swept the loading bay with a pale field, then passed on. No alarm. No escalation. Just a reminder that the system already knew where to look, and was being polite enough to wait.

Mai watched it go. "They're not fully locking the building."

"They want us inside."

"Yes."

Ace smiled with one side of her mouth. "Then we disappoint them on timing."

They waited through two more patrol sweeps, counting wrong under their breath whenever the drone rhythm started to feel too comfortable.

Three.

Seven.

Four.

Never the same pace twice.

The city beyond the corporate district muttered faintly under the rain: traffic, horns, someone somewhere refusing to let a bus stop be quiet. But here, inside the service perimeter, sound got absorbed too fast. The building liked soft things. Measured things.

Then one of the hidden cameras found them.

Not visibly.

By consequence.

A narrow display panel on the charging station lit without input, showing an innocuous maintenance notice for less than a second before the text shifted.

AUTHORIZED ENTRY REQUIRES CALM.

Mai exhaled through her nose. "That's new."

Ace's eyes stayed on the lit panel. "No. That's her."

Clean Hands again. Not appearing in full, not wasting theatrics. Just a line slipped into a system because she liked the intimacy of making machines repeat her worldview.

"Think she's watching live?" Mai asked.

Ace considered the yard, the glass, the deliberately absent personnel. "No. I think she's watching a prediction of us and calling it the same thing."

Mai hated that answer because it sounded right.

The east fence was lower than regulations should have allowed—decorative security for a district that preferred lawsuits to barbed wire. They moved when the third drone took the high loop and the fourth angled toward the loading dock, slipping over the fence and into the drainage corridor beyond.

Water moved there in thin silver lines through concrete channels, carrying runoff toward the river. The corridor walls were old—older than the wellness complex, older than most of the district,

municipal service bones wrapped later in private money. That mattered. Old city infrastructure had opinions. It remembered grime. It had not been built to admire anyone.

Mai touched the wall once in passing. "Better."

"Friendlier?"

"No. Just less eager to help them."

The maintenance access sat exactly where Bright had promised: half-concealed behind a support rib of brushed steel and smoked glass, low enough to look like a utility crawlspace, clean enough to cost more than Kaarlo's whole clinic.

No handle.

No visible panel.

Just a narrow seam and a sensor strip pretending it was decorative.

Mai pulled out the fractured key.

The little thing had started to feel warm in her pocket half a block ago, which was never a comforting sign. In her palm now it gave off the faintest vibration, as if recognizing the accent of the building.

Ace watched her angle it toward the seam. "Still hate that thing."

"It hates us too. That's why it works."

Mai pressed the key lightly against the sensor strip.

Nothing happened.

Then the glass support frame beside the door lit from within, not bright but pearly, like a screen deciding whether to be a mirror. For one stretched second Ace and Mai saw themselves reflected there—wet coats, tired eyes, shoulders close enough to count as one silhouette from the wrong software angle.

Then the reflection adjusted.

It tried to soften Ace's posture. It tried to square Mai's shoulders. It tried to render them calmer. Cleaner. More willing.

Ace made a low disgusted sound.

Mai didn't move the key. "It's asking for a posture sample."

"Can it choke on one?"

"Working on it."

She rotated the key slightly, then deliberately misaligned her own stance—one foot too far back, one shoulder low, chin angled wrong for all the flattering mathematics of the place. The reflected version of her twitched, lagged, and failed to settle.

Ace understood instantly. She leaned into ugliness too—hips wrong, head tilted, one hand loose near the katana hilt in a posture no corporate AI would categorize as safe to optimize.

The reflection began to fracture.

A line appeared through the center of the glass like a red thread pulling itself taut. Not physical. Not digital either. Something between. Something Choir-shaped.

Violet woke at once.

There, she whispered. A mouth preparing itself.

The seam clicked.

Once.

Twice.

The access door unlocked with a sound so soft it might have been imagined if not for the sudden change in air pressure.

Mai lowered the key carefully.

Neither of them moved.

A drone passed overhead on the other side of the support frame and kept going. The system had not yet admitted entry had happened. That was useful. It would not stay useful long.

Mai glanced at the door, then at Ace. “This is where the building starts cheating.”

Ace’s smirk returned, tired and sharp. “Then we’re finally speaking the same language.”

The access seam opened half a centimeter, just enough to reveal sterile white light beyond and a corridor too clean to trust.

From somewhere deeper inside came a low mechanical tone—steady, patient, and wrong in the way heart monitors become wrong when they start sounding too much like music.

Choir lungs.

Breath.

Cloud.

Whatever Bright had named it, it was here.

Mai slid the fractured key back into her sleeve. “Once we step through, every internal system starts building a better version of us.”

“Then we stay worse.”

“Exactly.”

Behind them, back in the yard, one of the service displays lit again.

Just one line.

WELCOME.

No signature. No hands. No need.

Ace looked at the half-open seam and felt Violet coil quietly along the inside of her ribs, no longer laughing now, just listening.

Careful, little blade, the whisper said. This place remembers how people should breathe.

Ace put her palm flat for one brief second against Mai's wrist, over the fresh hook-mark Kaarlo had drawn there earlier. A grounding. A count. A promise without ceremony.

"If I open," she said quietly, more to herself than to anyone else, "I open for you."

Mai's gaze held hers for exactly the time needed to make the sentence real. "Good," she said.

Then she pushed the maintenance door wider.

And together, timing ruined on purpose, they stepped toward the corridor that waited just on the other side of Chapter 8.—

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