

## ## Chapter 8 - Dissonant Flame

They cut north through alleys that had learned to breathe wrong. The city's reflections twitched when they tried to admire themselves. A bus shelter ad bled to bone once a minute and seemed pleased about it. Bright's last breadcrumb sketched the upstream node in a place that believed in plants and parking validation: the corporate wellness complex proper, not the satellite clinic—an atrium of glass, a spine of offices, and a basement that called itself utilities while hiding a small cathedral.

"Choir cache lives under the green roof," Mai said, scanning the plan on her tablet. "Return was the altar. This is breath."

"Then we break its lungs," Ace said.

The complex wore security like perfume—present, expensive, meant to flatter visitors into feeling safe. Two separation drones floated above the forecourt like patient swans. The third hung higher, pretending to be a star.

Bright's map led them through a service lane and a door that should have needed a badge. The fractured key learned the reader's accent and persuaded it. Inside, the service corridor glowed soft and flattering white that cameras love. The floor was marked with little arrows that made it easy to move efficiently and very hard to be a nuisance by accident.

"It's a trap," Mai said, as calmly as a weather report.

"Of course," Ace said, as calmly as a person setting a table.

The first drone slid in from behind, quiet as a promise. Its grid washed across the corridor—tidy boxes, tidy lines—and stayed after the projector should have let go. The second hummed ahead, drawing a gauze wall of light that found the even rhythms of their steps and tried to add them to inventory.

Mai shoved the dissonance filter into the corridor's reflection bus. The light stuttered, forgot its posture, tried to smooth, and met a surface that insisted on scar. The grid unraveled into so much useless glow.

Then the hallway changed.

Not the walls. The rules. A seam walked through the air and folded the corridor into two neat halves—polite isolation. Ace felt the pressure on her skin like the first moment you realize a stranger is standing too close. The far end of her half bent toward a door labeled **EQUIPMENT** in an obedient font. Mai's half bent toward **CALIBRATION**.

"Count," Mai said.

"Three," Ace answered.

"Seven," Mai said.

"Four," Ace finished—

—and the building answered **two, four, six, eight** in a whisper through the vents.

The drones pressed. A message crawled across the corridor's subtle LED baseboard, stripped and blunt: **ISOLATE OR BE ISOLATED**.

“Go,” Mai said. “They want us separate. We decide how.”

She jammed the welded tooth against the handrail bracket and clipped a lead. The candle stub flared in its tin, haloing the chalk-signed paper with a stubborn light. “Thirty seconds,” she said. “I give you a window.”

Ace nodded and moved into her half as if she’d asked for it. “If I open—”

“You open for me,” Mai said, and bit the heel of her own palm hard enough that the sting cut the air between them like a line they could both grip.

The seam thickened. Doors slid shut—politely. The drones backed off to respectable distance, confident in architecture.

Ace’s door opened onto a room that had been designed by someone who believed people behaved better when given soft furniture and options. A recliner waited. A projector hid. A camera watched without blinking. The reflection loops lay coiled around the mirror-bright vent duct.

“Hello,” Clean Hands said, voice arriving on the first breath like she’d been invited. “This is what help looks like.”

The chair didn’t grab; it suggested. The air cooled two degrees. The light remembered how to pet. Ace’s breath wanted to square itself. She let it try—and then she let it fail.

Violet smelled the trap and smiled with her teeth. \*Let me. I can eat this room and call it a snack.\*

“Half,” Ace said. She turned the lock in herself one notch. Green ran the nerves of her hands like a fuse laid along old scars. The projector flinched. The mirror missed a frame and hated it.

On the other side of the seam, Mai’s door opened into a corridor with too much glass. Her tablet caught three networks arguing about which one deserved to count; she told all of them to fight somewhere else.

“Maintenance ladder,” Bright had promised. “Side spur. Catwalk above the cache.” The corridor offered instead a hallway of **Breathwork** and **Tuning** and a pane of glass that pretended not to be a camera. Mai followed a sign that smelled faintly of varnish and money and found a service hatch disguised to match the floor. The fractured key woke it like a guilty memory.

Below, the cache spread in smaller geometry than the Nexus but with the same virtue-signaling neatness: racks, conduits, a platform for a supervisor who preferred “altar” in the privacy of her head. A plate of polished steel lived on the back wall to show the staff how well they were doing. The air hummed in even eights.

“Window,” Mai told herself. She wedged the tooth against the ladder’s base, struck the candle, and burned a crooked key into new air. The field lifted. The fans hiccupped. Two ceiling cams forgot their zoom settings. The plate thought about becoming honest.

In Ace’s room, the reflection tightened into memory. The walls stretched into ribs and wire. The floor remembered how to hum with organ air. The chair became a dais. The projector became a choir. Clean Hands’ voice blurred and then agreed with itself.

The Cathedral rose through the white like a bruise through powder.

Ace stood in two rooms. In both, Violet arched like a cat that had heard a door crack. In one, the First Voice arrived without moving—just by existing—layer on layer of vowel and breath braided into a pressure that wanted to make your bones line up. It did not speak. It made speaking a place you could go sit in.

\*Little blade,\* Violet said, soft in the loud. \*They want you to be a cup. I want you to be a hand.\*

Ace felt the old altar at her calves; she felt Mai's nail-drawn hook burning at her wrist. She breathed wrong because Mai had asked, not because Violet wanted. The light tried to smooth her inhale to even. She coughed once, mean as a pebble in a shoe.

"Open," Clean Hands murmured, sweet as a sedative. "Just enough. We can take the weight."

"Not yours," Ace said. "Ours."

The room pressed. The Voice did not say **two**, but the world found a way to hear it.

Mai ran the ladder, turned sideways over the catwalk, landed in a crouch meant for people who belonged near machines. Two techs worked the consoles with the focus of trained penance. A drone pivoted toward the ladder, measuring with light. She fed the field more ugly. The drone rethought light as taste and choked.

"Don't scream," a quiet voice said under the catwalk. Lux, wrapped in reflective nothing like a shadow trying to remember what being a person had felt like. They didn't look up. "If you save me, she gets you. If you leave me, she gets me. Choose which hymn you want in your throat later."

Mai didn't answer. She didn't look. She burned the paper down to the tooth and pushed the field until the walls stuttered.

The room around Ace sealed itself with courtesy. A headset lowered and stayed an inch too far, like patience that knew it would be rewarded. The breath in her chest wanted to heel. She let it pull at the leash. She opened—another notch. Green crawled her bones. Violet slid along her ribs like a blade remembering the scabbard it loved.

The First Voice leaned. It didn't speak in words—it spoke in the feeling you get when a crowd decides to clap together without planning. The part of Ace that had learned to love dissonance rang like a struck rail.

\*Choose,\* Violet whispered, not coaxing for once. \*Let me be inside your hand or outside your mouth. I'm you either way—but I'm better with skin.\*

Mai's voice wasn't here. Mai's hand wasn't here. The hook burned anyway because skin keeps promises. Ace saw the katanas leaned against the couch last night and the diagonal on the wall brightening and going quiet and Mai's teeth quick on the pad of her thumb. She was two rooms and one person—and that was the entire point.

"If I open," she said into the pressure, "I open for her."

The Voice pressed again, tuning forks of people far away humming sympathetic obedience. Numbers crawled along the edges of the world. **2 4 6 8** like bracelets you don't remember putting on.

Ace did a wicked thing and smiled at it. Then she opened—not all, not the catastrophic hinge—but enough to let Violet sit up properly in the light.

Green bled across the chair's shadow. The room tried to apologize. She declined. The headset dipped. She raised her head and let it miss.

"Now," she told herself.

Violet went for the seam where praise becomes compulsion. The green bit and held. The projector juddered; the mirror missed more frames. The reflection tried to show Ace a better version of her jawline; it drew the blade instead.

Clean Hands' voice hit a register that called itself concern. "You won't be able to hold that. You'll want rest. You'll come to me to confess how hard it was to love her like this."

Ace tipped her head, letting Violet's green curl up along her cheek like paint you weren't allowed to wear in uniforms. "When I need rest," she said, "I'll use her shoulder, not your chair."

The seam in the room—that polite fold that made isolation feel like a health choice—thinned. The mirror threw back a woman whose eyes held a line of bright, mean color and who laughed because someone had told her she wasn't allowed to and she knew better.

Under the catwalk, the cache's steel plate shivered on its mounts. Mai saw it and pushed. The tooth glowed dull red where her field grounded in the rail. The fans changed key. A screen on the supervisor's console scrolled a diagnostic that begged to be rescued from beauty.

"Sever where it looks back," she told herself, and moved.

She wasn't Ace, but she had her own knives. She tore the cover off the return path plate and slapped a chalk square on its back with hands that stank of tin and smoke. She pressed the tooth to the chalk and made a fist. The field snapped. The reflection lost its appetite.

Clean Hands didn't shout. She exhaled a fraction—the way you do when you're assembling a smile you use on donors after a small fire.

"Isolate," she said to the room.

The drones surged. The seam folded harder. The corridor tried to forget Ace existed. In her half-room, the chair's haptics rolled persuasion down the arms with slick efficiency. The headset warmed. The world narrowed to a funnel that wanted to be called care.

Ace stood. She didn't move her feet. She let Violet fill the outline of her hands and forearms to the elbow—a green gauntlet drawn on with breath. She took the headset and pressed it gently to the ceiling. It stuck there a second longer than design allowed and then fell, not breaking, but humiliated.

"Mai," she said into a seam that thought it was soundproof.

Mai heard nothing; the seam ate audio like a favorite food. But she felt the word land anyway because people who bite each other's hands to draw keys into skin do not always need ears.

She cut the return. The plate snapped from honest to nothing, then back to honest, then learned to prefer nothing. The cache hiccupped. The staff looked up as if a wind had gone through and decided not to leave. The drone above the ladder decided that tasteful hover counted as retreat.

Clean Hands looked toward the ceiling where Mai crouched above her reflection like a saint on scaffolding and said, almost fond, "You're going to make her choose to hurt you later."

Mai smiled with none of her mouth. "Get in line."

In Ace's room the Cathedral flared bright enough to be a headache and then tore like a bad poster. The First Voice did not scream; it pulsed dissent into compliance. Violet met it not with volume but with wrongness: a single note held ugly on purpose until pretty had to move out of the way.

Ace pushed the green through the seam. It ran along the corridor like a rumor with teeth and bit the baseboard that had been telling the air what numbers to like. The seam unclasped with the offended sigh of a door that believed in itself.

The doors opened as politely as they had closed. The corridor remembered being a corridor. Ace stepped across the threshold into air that smelled like filtered lemon and victory's cheaper cousin.

Mai slid off the catwalk and hit the floor like a quiet decision. A tech looked at her the way people look at messengers who insist on continuing to exist. She didn't offer explanation; she had none that would satisfy.

They met at the corner where the seam had been. Mai's hand found Ace's wrist—thumb on the hook—pushing until the sting said \*ours\* again.

"Partial," Ace said. "I integrated her."

Mai's eyes climbed to the green that still edged Ace's knuckles like a dare, and then to the projector that was trying to remember how to be confident. "Controlled?"

"I opened for you," Ace said, and it wasn't poetry.

The building announced its displeasure with discreet alarm tones that would not distress investors. **PLEASE PROCEED TO NEAREST EXIT** scrolled in six languages along the baseboard with the tired sympathy of a parent who has been ignored all day.

"Go," Mai said. "They'll reset. The breath will come back."

"Enough time to teach the city another bad habit," Ace said.

They ran only when the last corner took away cameras. Above ground, the wellness complex glowed like a responsible future in a brochure. A drone drifted sideways and stayed that way, blinking out of sequence. The river took light and refused to give it back evenly.

Back at street level a small crowd watched an ad with too much bone in it and laughed without agreeing on when. Someone had glued a paper key over a camera and the camera had decided to live with the embarrassment.

Karlo's side-channel chirped. **If you're going to sin, at least pick a short hymn**, he wrote. **Half the city just learned the ugly note. We can hold clinics all week.**

Bright's: **You bought time. Overseer is moving hardware to the Nexus. She wants a finale. I suggest you oblige.**

Ace and Mai stood with their backs to a wall that had never liked mirrors and looked at their hands—chalk-hook, burned palm, a line of green fading back into skin the color of a decision.

"Next?" Ace said.

“The altar,” Mai said. “We cut the choir’s throat.”

They walked. The city followed to the curb and then waited, counting wrong with them just to see what it felt like. Somewhere, Clean Hands clasped fingers in a prayer that had never once been for anyone else and told her drones to find a better angle. Somewhere, the First Voice collected its echoes and planned to be a god again.

Ace flexed her hands; the last trace of green bled away and left nerve and bone and choice. Violet settled on her ribs like a cat under a lamp.

\*Little blade,\* the voice murmured, pleased. \*When you make music, make it cruel.\*

“Ugly,” Ace said.

Mai smiled, quick and tired and ruinous. “Cruelly ugly,” she corrected.

Their steps set a cadence the grid refused to like. The river waited. The Nexus sang under its breath. The city, imperfect and awake, came along. —

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