

Chapter 7 — Collapse and Exit

The annex didn't explode. It sulked. That was worse.

The corridor outside the nave was generous for six steps and then decided generosity was for other halls. The ceiling remembered it enjoyed being low. The floor found a polite slope. Fire doors preened in their rails like big cats you shouldn't pet.

"Fiber?" Ace asked, the Pelican balanced in her hand like a promise and an argument.

"True within a lie," Mai said, testing tension. The spool disagreed with physics with admirable composure. "I'll translate."

They moved in the cadence the building wanted to deny them—unhurried, confident, the rhythm of people who hadn't been invited but would still leave on their own terms. The first door clunked in its housing. Mai slid a coil under the track, gave it a purr of power, and the door forgot how to drop for three seconds.

"Go," she said.

They threaded through, shoulders nearly brushing metal. Beyond, a compact aisle rolled as if embarrassed to be helpful, giving them a seam exactly as wide as the Pelican. Ace didn't say thank you. Let rooms take what compliments they earned.

"Left," Mai said, without looking at the lying arrows. She was following mundane truth: scuffs at knee height where carts had kissed walls; a thermostat mounted at the boring, correct height by a civil servant with a union; the way dust lay deeper where a door had stayed shut for years. Buildings can fake miracles. They are bad at faking boredom.

The floor tried to feather into a ramp toward a dark that promised to be dramatic. Mai gave it a small pulse and it remembered flatness. The red knee-stripe arrived, kinked, apologized, and led them to a stairwell with wired glass that reflected Ace a beat late, then caught up like a child.

"Bright?" Mai tried. White noise. They could almost hear his grin in the hiss.

Down a flight, the stair wanted to be a chute. "Don't," Ace told it, and it didn't. On the landing, a door labeled **LOADING** (font: correct for the building; scuffs: sincere) opened when Mai palmed the pushbar. Beyond it: a corridor wide enough for dignity, then a roll-up door at the far end that trembled as if a truck going by had upset it, except no trucks went by here anymore.

The roll-up had a chain. Normal chain. Ace wrapped it around her wrist and pulled a smooth yard, set the lock, and the door rose as if remembering what doors do when asked properly. Outside, the facade looked like itself, which is to say it looked tired and smug and municipal. If you stared at the windows you could count too many. Don't stare.

"Street," Mai said quietly. "Move."

They stepped into cold air that felt like new lungs. The building didn't scream. It simply adjusted: a veneer of brick lifting like scales, a row of ribs along the second floor where the windows didn't align rubbing itself like a cat against a couch.

Bright's voice dropped in and caught itself on their ears like a relieved hand. "There you are. I was about to marry the van and declare myself a widower."

“Gross twice,” Ace said, breathing better and hating that she liked it.

“Left,” Bright said. “Alley. Police are not here, which is almost as alarming as if they were. The facade is adding... you know what? I won’t describe it. Just keep walking.”

They moved along the annex’s side. The brick had learned a new way to arrange itself. A window where no window belonged showed a room that was not inside this building, not in this decade. A small figure in black passed the window, exactly Ace’s height, exactly Ace’s tilt of head. It smiled the way reflections smile when taught by bad instructors. Ace didn’t spare it a second. Mai didn’t look at all.

At the corner, the alley opened toward the street where the van waited like an idea you were grateful someone else had had for you. Bright stood with the mast guyed to a no-parking sign, coat flapping, pendant very red against very ordinary air. He had a beanbag shotgun slung and the kind of grin that survives end-of-worlds.

“Delivery?” he asked, because tone is armor.

“Contained,” Mai said. “Not fed.”

“Excellent.” His eyes ran over them exactly once—hands, gait, color in the lips—inventory, triage, relief. “You look horrible,” he added gently. “Get in.”

The annex behind them made a small, unhappy decision. A new seam skated along the brick to their right and opened enough to be called a doorway by someone with no sense of self-preservation. The doorway showed stairs that could not exist in that wall. A boy in a paper mask looked out and did not step through. He tilted his head too far. The mask smiled for him.

“Time to go,” Ace said.

They loaded. Mai secured the Pelican with straps she trusted more than God. Bright yanked the mast, threw it into the van, and slammed the doors as the not-door in the wall reconsidered its career and shut with miffed masonry.

Ace slid into the driver’s seat. Bright was already buckled, reading his pendant like it was a text message from fate. Mai, in back with the case, set a coil against the wall so the van’s interior would remember to be a box. The engine turned over; the van liked leaving.

As Ace pulled out, the annex relaxed in their mirrors in a way that made the skin between her shoulders complain. It wasn’t alive. It was busy. It would be fine. She told herself that like a parent lies to a child and knew Mai could hear the lie and approve of the intent anyway.

“Jack,” Ace said, eyes on the road. “Who wanted to see what it could do.”

Bright watched the building decrease and didn’t look away. “Someone with access and worship, not necessarily in that order.”

“Order splinter,” Mai said.

“Or a collector with a thesis,” Bright said softly. “Archival cosmology. Builds himself an answer key and starts filling in blanks. The Architect is a very tempting blank.”

“Name,” Ace said.

“Working on it,” Bright said. “Later. We’re going to put our friend into a room that’s small on purpose and see if he sleeps.”

“Inside voice,” Mai murmured, and patted the case like you pat a cat that isn’t yours but loves your lap anyway.

In the side mirror, for one beat, Ace saw herself in the annex’s nearest window—a tiny black figure with her tilt and her patience, smiling a little late. The mirror corrected itself. The road showed only fog and rails and a city tired of pretending it remembered this district. —

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